The Offering

UMass Lowell Literary Society – 2003



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A Publication of the UMass Lowell Literary Society

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Spring, 2003

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Swinging

Jennifer Bassett

Ella pushes off
With the balls of her feet.
Dust flies up and settles again.
Tanned arms and knees bend,
Then straighten as her body moves
Forward.
The clouds rush her towards her body.
She grasps the chains on her sides
Tightly in her sweaty palms.
Above they move her with a
Scree-scruh, scree-scruh
And she climbs higher into the air.
Blond waves whip into her face
Then stream along behind as she moves
Forward.
With chipped bubble gum pink painted toenails
Pointed to the sky,

She jumps.

Summer of Love

Hilary Holladay

"Sometimes I dream of at last becoming a child."
– Robert Duncan

She stirs within me:

Wearing a homemade white dress with red cherries on it,
she runs across dry grass crackling under midday sun,

then holds up her kindergarten diploma
and smiles into a world where maples surround the old stucco house

and her parents and sisters are always around,
their laughter coming from one room or another.

That night, when the stars pierce the darkness
and slip inside her summertime dreams,

sorrow passes beyond her brow, lets her rest.
This will always be a happy day.

She stirs within me

Forever after, she can have Vietnam and Blackness,
the potent power of flowers.

She can research riots and read up on rebellion.
She can attend seminars, then teach them, teach them all.

For now, she has hung up her new dress,

and the colorful diploma uncurls in moonlight.

Far away, college freshmen are taking LSD for fun,
soldiers are swearing in the Laotian rain.

Some of the dying live on.
What is the legacy they leave her?

The telling of time, an alphabet there for the asking.

Salvage

Gigi Thibodeau

The winter before they tore down the house next door
I chucked rocks through every window.
One time I picked the padlock and snuck inside,
gum-rubbered feet sifting through plaster,
shattered glass, and rocks, finding
half a checkerboard and a pink mud-caked sock
in a dresser-less drawer.

Wind rushed through the splintered windows.
I imagined a stranger walking by, seeing me inside—
like the eye of Alice, the girl who'd lived here
with her mother and dogs and the voices
of men through the screen door, their talk—
now teasing, now hurled like plates and cups—
awash in the flow of tap water and car mufflers.

And always Alice, peering through the stockade fence,
a dark-eyed knot in the wood,
breathing loudly while I played Barbie's Dream House
on the lawn, looked up sometimes to meet her faceless gaze.
I learned her name one day from the slap and hiss
of her mother's cry on the porch—
A-lice! And then the black eye was gone

and her bare feet were pounding up steps, hammering
the beat of her into me; her invisible life made real
by a name that felt pink as ribbon in my mouth,
cool and sweet as sugar ice—Alice.

Now her house stood slack-jawed, gutted,
and she was gone anywhere a rusted blue car could take a little girl.
From a window upstairs I saw over the fence
into my own yard, the lawn frozen yellow, playing dead.
And then on the windowsill, another yellow—small flash
of sunlight, my fingers closing quickly around a cat's eye marble,
and then my pocket full of sight.

Scratch

Sean Conway

Putting up a swing set is a hell of a lot more work than you'd think. A hell of a lot more. First of all, there's the whole problem of getting it to your house. Even if it's bought unassembled the box is pretty damn big, not to mention heavy and awkward, and you're going to need a pickup truck. In fact, the only easy thing about this whole fiasco was that I got the set off a buddy of mine—his kids were twelve and eleven now and never used it. Gave it to me for nothing. I had to take it apart in three places and make three separate trips, but, hey, free is free. It was a little old and rusted so I spray painted it with a couple coats of powder blue Rustoleum. Much better than the faded and dull candy stripes it had been. Once it had the fresh paint I started to get excited. Chloe was going to love it.

Now came the hard part. The far back corner of the yard was the best place for it, away from the neighbor's barbeque pit and dog house. It was the biggest drawback from living in a townhouse, having to share the back yard. But it wasn't too big a deal because I had found a good spot for it. Only problem was, that corner of the yard, near the woods, was infested with poison ivy.

The neighbors must have thought I'd lost my mind. Moved in less than two weeks and there I was out in the yard in a long sleeved turtleneck, long pants, gloves, and a ski mask. And it was practically July. Hacksaw in hand, I swung away, sweating and swearing with the neighbors and the summer sun staring down at me. The funny thing was, no matter how careful I was I knew I'd end up with poison ivy. The stuff loved me. Every year I somehow wound up covered in it. But at least I had learned how to

deal with and properly treat it. Not much of a bright side, though.

Once I had cleared away that whole corner, the yard looked much bigger. Plenty of room for the new swing set. I dug four holes for the four legs of the set to be planted, because you can't just let it rest on the ground. If the kids get to swinging high enough the swing set will start to thump, where one of the legs lifts off the ground with the momentum and thumps back down. I don't know how dangerous it is but it sure is annoying. So the proper thing to do is dig the holes for the legs and then fill them in with a bag of quick-dry cement. It isn't going to go anywhere after that.

With the legs cemented it was clear sailing. I replaced the rusted chains and cheap plastic seats with nice wooden seats and strong rope. There was an aluminum slide that needed to be scraped clean of some rust, and I finished it with a coat of grease to give it some serious slip. Then, last but not least, I bought some Disney character stencils and painted pink silhouettes of Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, and whoever else all over the swing set. I was so thrilled with the end result that when I was finally done I sat down on the grass with a cold beer and stared at it, admiring my work.

The divorce wasn't even in the early stages yet, but I was confident there weren't going to be any problems. Sheri and I had already agreed before I even moved out that I would be able to have Chloe to myself every other weekend. I gave a cautious push for every weekend, but I didn't want to make Sheri uneasy, didn't want to go for too much. Chloe was only four and Sheri didn't think it was a good idea to bounce her around between us too much. And I wasn't really in a position to argue with her—she had thrown me out of the house only a few weeks earlier.

I couldn't wait to get home from the office because all day long there were these two soft bumps on the inside of my right hand that were itching like hell. You wouldn't think such small little things could drive someone so crazy, but, man, I sped all the way home. Ever since putting up the swing set two days before I'd been waiting for them to pop up. I'd been chewing my lip most of the day as a distraction, and that was getting sore now too, but you can't mess around with poison ivy. You can't touch it at all, you really can't. That right there is the most important thing.

I bought some calamine lotion on the way home—you know, that pink stuff. There are a lot of other products on the market for poison ivy, and they're all more expensive, much more expensive, but I'm telling you the original is the best. Regular good old calamine lotion. I also bought a bag of cotton balls and some gauze tape, just in case it got bad and I need-

ed to cover it. When I got home I lightly dabbed the two spots, which were actually, now that I got a chance to look at it up close under the fluorescent lights of the bathroom, a tiny cluster of three or four bumps, overlapping each other a little bit. I dabbed carefully, giving it a nice heavy coat, then blew gently on it to help it dry. This created a protective seal. Then I scrubbed my hands with antibacterial soap. It's a myth that you can spread poison ivy to another person—you can't, you can only catch it from being allergic to the plant itself—but you can certainly spread it amongst yourself. Especially in my case, so I really couldn't be careful enough.

I don't even remember what exactly happened. I really don't. We were having one of our fights again—we'd been having them a lot, probably every two or three nights—and they were getting progressively worse. What were they even about? Christ, I don't remember that either. But they'd been getting nastier recently, a lot of screaming, a lot of name calling. Ugly stuff.

I take my share of the blame, I certainly do. I'm not trying to worm out of that. But what you've got to understand is that Sheri's the type who can't ever let anything go. She really can't. Once an argument ensues, there is just no turning back. Any strategy that I might try is doomed to failure—if I yell back, she'll yell louder; if I ignore her, she'll get right up in my face; and even if I agree with her, she hammers the same point over and over. I admit that I get the ball rolling a good part of the time, but that's because she'll pull something out of the clear blue, just when we're supposed to be settling in for the night and relaxing, and I'll lose my patience and maybe say something a little mean, I guess. I don't know. Too late now.

I ordered a submarine sandwich to be delivered for dinner, along with a side of onion rings. I hadn't really been eating all that well since moving, but I couldn't be bothered cooking just for one. I'd planned to cook on the weekends that Chloe was here, but aside from that, I couldn't promise myself anything. After I ate I watched some TV—the news, a game show or two, then a few solid hours of flipping channels, sipping on a couple beers, trying my best to ignore the growing itch that stewed under a patch of cracked calamine lotion.

The hardest thing about getting used to the new place were these weekday evenings. The take out meals, the dull echo of the rooms because there was hardly any furniture in them, that kind of stuff. I had a small black and white television in my bedroom with a crumpled coat hanger for an antenna because there wasn't any cable connection in there, and when

finally dragged myself to bed after nodding off on the couch for an hour or so, I always turned on the black and white, just for a little background noise. Since being alone, I couldn't sleep without it.

So this one particular fight, the last one, she pulled a nutty on me which I wasn't particularly in the mood for. I stepped right up to her, nice and calmly, and offered her a free shot. She was red with anger, face glistening from tears, and to make things worse I teased her with a subtly crooked grin. That was the other thing—I rarely showed an ounce of emotion, never gave her the satisfaction of a reaction. I knew it drove her nuts but I couldn't be bothered wasting the energy. Fighting just isn't efficient.

She whacked me in the head, or slapped me, or punched me—I don't even know. I remember her throwing her weight into me, backing me up against the sink. All I was trying to do was get her off me, get her the hell away. Next thing I knew, she was recoiling from me with this surprised look on her face. There was a thin but bright scratch across her cheek, almost reaching the side of her mouth. I don't know how it happened.

But it was our last big blowout. Chloe had woken up and was standing at the top of the stairs, balling her eyes out. I think that was it more than anything else. Her crying stopped us in our tracks, the anger immediately snuffed out by Chloe's fear. We knew we could not fight ever again like that, and to make certain of it I agreed to move out.

I awoke sometime in the middle of the night, and I'm not sure what woke me. It may have been a string of bad dreams I was having—the typical stuff that I'd been dreaming almost every night, nightmares about Chloe—or it might have been the growing itch of the poison ivy. I must have been scratching it in my sleep, because I awoke with such a wild burn on my forearms and shoulder that I knew I wasn't going to be able to get back to sleep.

Instead I got up and drew myself a bath. I never took baths, not since I was a small kid, at least, but when the poison ivy started to get bad it became a necessity. I only wished I fit better in the tub, make it a bit more comfortable. The trick was to take a long warm bath—not too hot—with plenty of epsom salt to help relieve the itch and dry out the rash. So that's what I did from 3:15 until quarter of four that morning. Soaked in the tub, biting my teeth together whenever I accidentally rubbed my arm against something and the maddening crawl of poison ivy awoke. Aside from a few of those moments, I was actually able to begin to relax again, my head

against the hard porcelain and a steady drip clacking from the faucet into the pool of water between my knees.

It was early Wednesday morning. I hadn't seen Chloe since Saturday when I had stopped by the house to get some of my things—the black and white TV, an old dresser, a set of pots and pans in a wet box—all stuff that had been sitting out in the garage unused. I wanted this upcoming weekend to be my first with Chloe in my new place, but Sheri had taken her down to Fairfield, Connecticut to visit her parents. I guess it wasn't a bad idea given the situation. Sheri had been terribly upset these last couple weeks and needed the change of scenery for awhile, not to mention the moral support of her family. I couldn't argue with that. I was also going to have to come by the house one more time with my buddy's truck to get the last of my furniture, and Sheri understandably didn't want to be there. On Saturday she had sat in the bedroom the entire time I was out in the garage. That was all right, though, since Chloe was with me, sitting on the hood of Sheri's Civic while I loaded up my trunk. But the getaway was good for Sheri—good for both of them, I'm sure. The grand opening of Chloe's weekend home would have to wait until the following week. All right by me.

Every night I needed the drone of the TV to put me to sleep, and I wasn't sleeping well at all. But I knew that would change once Chloe was here. Already I had it planned out, thoroughly visualized. I was going to sleep with my bedroom door open, and leave her door open as well, so that I would be able to hear her breathe as she slept. I loved how she sounded when she was deep asleep. Not quite snoring, but just that long, calm breathing, occasionally hitching, lips sometimes smacking as she stirred. I couldn't wait for that. It was all this townhouse was missing.

As I had predicted, the poison ivy exploded. From my shoulder it had spread across my neck and, by Sunday, was touching my jaw line. The bumps on my forearms festered and branched out over my hands and between my fingers. New outbreaks flared on my stomach, hip, thigh, and right calf. The calf and the stomach were always the itchiest, something about all that soft flesh.

I thought about taking Monday off, dreading the idea of having to wear a long-sleeved shirt and tie, being uncomfortable and miserable all day long, not to mention everyone looking at me and getting disgusted with the rash of bumps that reached over my jaw and peppered my cheek. I couldn't do it, though. I couldn't bare the thought of sitting around all day with nothing to do. I needed the structure of the office right now, not just to take my mind off the poison ivy but to take my mind off everything else that was going on. I needed work—let's face it—to take my mind off my loneliness.

I got up extra early so I could pay proper attention to treating the outbreak. The poison ivy was at a critical stage, when not only was it spreading to other parts of my body, but was overlapping itself, bumps and blisters sprouting on top of bumps and blisters. The itch was feverish. Applying the calamine lotion took the utmost display of self-control, when every slight touch of a cotton ball triggered an electric jolt of itch that rivaled almost any other form of physical torture. I had to sit down to do the job, dropping the toilet lid and planting myself so that I remained stable. A wet clump of sweaty hair kept falling over my eye, and I had to repeatedly push it back with my uninfected shoulder. I dabbed carefully, though. Quick, soft touches of the cotton, damp with calamine lotion but not saturated, followed by delicate blowing to help it dry. There was a lot of area to cover, and I emptied close to half the bottle in this one sitting. I reminded myself to buy a couple more bottles on the way home from work. Once finished, I stood with the overhead heat lamps on and let my body dry, my legs apart and arms open. I carefully washed my hands, paying attention not to let the pinky and ring finger of my left hand get wet, as they were coated in a shell of pink lotion. Then I unrolled a long strip of gauze and lightly wrapped both arms as well as those two fingers. I was a mess, I really was. I didn't even want to glance in the mirror. I dressed quickly, grabbed a plastic cup of coffee, then pocketed a bottle of Benadryl and left for work, dreading this whole goddamned day.

I blew into the house at six that night raving mad with sickening itch. I hadn't touched it all day, not a single cheat. Conquering this stuff takes some serious discipline. Mind over matter, right? That's right, mind over matter. I needed an epsom salt bath—I'd been craving one since lunch.

Like I said, you don't want the bath too hot—that only irritates it. A warm bath is what you need, comfortably warm with plenty of salt to dry the poison ivy rash. I lay there for a long time, eyes closed and head back, pulling myself into a much-needed cocoon of wet relaxation. The faucet was opened just a notch, enough to keep a slow trickle of hot water threading the bath. Its steady plunking nearly put me to sleep.

I thought I might have heard the phone ring, but when I sat forward and turned the water off I couldn't hear anything. I waited for a moment, listening, then flipped the hot water on again and settled back. After the

bath, I gently patted myself dry with a clean towel, careful not to rub the spreading rash and enflame the itch, then repeated the calamine lotion process all over again. You couldn't be hasty with this procedure, because if you did you might be too abrasive and trigger the itch, or you might accidentally make things worse by spreading it with a contaminated cotton ball. You had to be careful.

I rewrapped the gauze over my arms and fingers after standing under the heat lamps for seven minutes, which is how long it took three coats of calamine lotion to thoroughly dry. Three minutes for a single coat, five minutes for two coats, and seven for three. Once dressed, I went out into the kitchen and checked the phone machine. A small red light pulsed with a message. I cracked a beer and pressed play.

"Hey, it's me. Listen, give me a call back on my cell when you get in. I need to talk to you about something, okay? Okay...all right, bye."

What was that all about? It was Sheri, but she had sounded awfully edgy, a little nervous. I scooped up the phone, leaning back against the counter, wondering what was going on. She hadn't sounded particularly distressed, just a little off, is all. I punched up her number from memory, I'd done it a million times before, and while I waited for her end to start ringing I couldn't shake the thought that perhaps she had rethought this whole thing. Maybe she had talked with her parents, and they had told her what a shame it all was that we couldn't work it out, what a nice guy I was, and maybe these last few days, completely removed from the worries of everyday life, had made her wonder whether we were doing the right thing. I began to think that maybe she had not in fact sounded nervous on the phone, but rather uncertain. She probably missed me and just wanted to tell me that. Probably wanted to tell me that she wasn't a hundred percent sure this breakup was a good idea. Maybe she just wanted to hear my...

"Hello?"

I cleared my throat, shook the daydream from my head. "Sheri yeah, hi."

"Hi. How're things?"

She still sounded weird to me. I sipped my beer. "Things are good I guess."

"That's good," she said, dragging out a sigh.

"Um, where are you? Still in Connecticut or back home?" They weren't supposed to be back until Thursday or Friday, the end of the week.

"No, still here. Still at my parents'."

"Oh." I half-sat on the edge of the kitchen sink and glimpsed the swing set standing at the back corner of the yard. Something about it looked a little strange. I licked my lips and said, "So, what's going on, hon?" I thought I heard Chloe's voice in the background, faraway.

"Well, I wanted to talk to you about something."

"Yeah, I know. I got that off the message."

She forced an uncomfortable laugh.

"So. What is it? What's up?" I looked harder at the swing set.

"I, uh, was...I was talking to my parents. Last night."

I took a deep slug off my beer, readying myself. "Okay. I'm with you so far."

"And, well, and we were talking, and, you know, just talking about things, different things, our situation and everything—"

What was different about that swing set? Why'd it look so off?

"—and I think we pretty much decided that, uh, well, I decided is more like it, I guess, that the best thing, for right now anyway..."

"Sheri, come on. Spit it out, hon. Just say it." I felt lightheaded all of a sudden.

She forced another nervous laugh. "Chloe and I are going to, you know, stay here, stay down here..."

I stood off the counter. "What do you mean, how long?"

"My father's going to redo the downstairs. It's already got those two rooms and he's just going to put up a door and then wall-off part of the—"

"Wait wait wait. Wait a second. What are you talking about? Redo the downstairs for what?"

"Well, like I said, he's going to..."

"He's going to redo the downstairs, yeah, I got that. But what the fuck for?"

"Jesus, don't do this. I'm trying to tell you that I talked to them for a long time last night, a really long time. And they offered to turn the downstairs into a small apartment. No one uses it anymore, you know? It's just them now, so..."

"Are you for real? Seriously, are you fucking for real, Sheri? Where'd this come from? Where'd all this come from? One day you're going down for a visit and the next you tell me you're not coming back? Is this a frigging joke?"

"I'm coming back. I'm coming back in a couple days but I wanted to tell you right away what we decided. He's going to work on the room for a few weeks and then we're going to move down there. Listen, listen to me. I know you're mad but listen. This makes sense."

"Makes sense? How the Christ does it make sense?" I was pacing, the phone cord wrapping around me like an anaconda, squeezing me, killing me. I had the beer fisted in my hand but I was too shaky with rage to put it to my lips. I was sweating and it made my arms itch under the gauze.

She tried to lay some half-baked explanation on me, but I hardly heard her. I think I was hyperventilating a bit, marching back and forth, muttering "shit" over and over, almost chanting it.

"Chloe and I can live there for nothing, Pete. It makes a lot of sense for us right now. And she won't be starting school until next year, so now's the right time to do something like this. I went to school here, you know. It's a great school system."

"What? What are you talking about, Sheri? Who gives a rat's ass about the school system? I...I don't fucking believe this, I really don't."

"You need to be calm..."

"Fuck calm, Sheri. Don't you think this is the sort of thing we should have talked about together? What gives you the right to spring it on me like—"

"We're getting divorced, remember? You moved out. What am I supposed to do?"

"What are you supposed to do? You're supposed to come talk to me about big decisions like this."

"I am talking to you."

"You know what I mean." I huffed through my nose, pushed my fingers through my wet hair. My eye fell back to the window, at the swing set. "You do realize I just moved into my place two weeks ago, right Sheri? You do realize that. You do realize that I just signed a one year lease and put down an eleven hundred dollar security deposit. Right? You know all this, right?"

"Yes, I do. So what does that mean? What's that got to do—"

"You're moving to fucking Connecticut, Sheri!"

"Don't yell at me, Pete. You can't do that anymore..."

"I knew you'd pull something like this, I really did. I frigging knew your mother was going to brainwash you again into making—"

"You're getting ridiculous."

"Me? What the hell do you expect—"

"I'm hanging up..."

"Don't you dare hang up. Don't."

"Then stop yelling."

"You're making me nuts, Sheri! I can't just sit here—"

That was when I stopped. She'd been on her cell phone and it's always hard to tell when someone hangs up a cell phone. There isn't that tell-tale click that let's you know the line's dead. I listened for a moment, hearing only silence. I tried to pay attention for her breathing, or for Chloe in the background. I didn't hear anything—she definitely hung up.

I fumbled over the number pad with my thumb, misdialing, hanging up, trying it again. Slower this time. "Answer the phone, Sheri. Don't do this to me."

She waited until the fourth ring to pick up. Just to bust my balls. "Pete, listen for a second."

"What am I supposed to do now, Sheri? I just got a new frigging place so I'd be close by and now you're moving down to fucking Connecticut!"

"Yes, I am. It's two hours, Pete. A little over two hours."

"Yes! Two goddamn hours! That's right!"

I kept going for another minute before realizing that she had hung up on me again. I pitched my beer into the sink and the bottle burst into a fury of brown glass and foam. I dialed her again, sweating and swearing, eyes welling with confusion. I tried to untangle the cord but was too pissed, drawing it tighter against my torso. Answer, Sheri. Don't do this, don't do this, don't you dare do this...

"Hey, can't get to the phone right now. Leave a message."

I draped a shaky hand over the kitchen faucet, hanging my head, letting a strand of spit stretch into the sink. Then leaned my forehead against the cool glass of the window, and heard her voicemail give me the go-ahead beep. I closed my eyes.

"Don't," was all I think I said.

I downed another beer, then took one outside with me. It was too hot in that airless mother of a townhouse. I couldn't breathe. The itch was unbearable. My whole body. Skin seething and wriggling with brutal itch. I couldn't get outside of it.

There was a new cluster on my lap, on the top of my right thigh, to be exact. I noticed this when I was sitting on the new wooden seat of the swing set, rocking easily, staring into my lap. Four, five, six new bumps, stacked atop one another, white blisters crowned in red halos. But my arms were the worst, still. It was the gauze.

I figured out why the swing set looked wrong, figured it out while I was gazing down at my sandals. There was grass under my feet. Most swing sets, all swing sets, have those signature patches of worn earth

beneath each swing, where kids drag their feet to stop themselves. That was it, that was the difference. This one didn't have that.

I kept staring at the green grass, wide-eyed and unblinking, at where the bald patches should have been. Somehow, I didn't even realize that I had unraveled the gauze, tugged it off my arms. And I was hardly aware that I'd begun to claw through the poison ivy, raking it off my arms and stomach and shoulder and even my face, stripping it off me in euphoric ribbons of blood and pus. I dug my nails in hard and deep and scratched and scratched and fucking scratched, till I was dizzy and nauseous and sick. But, God, it felt so good.

Trinkets

Shelby Bennett

And my mother now wears the aquamarine
that Grandma did three years
ago
before she succumbed to the
loneliness
laying to sleep for the last time
among her collection of
QVC boxes
filled with trinkets distracting her
for mere minutes

When I visit her pink quartz headstone
and lay a bouquet of carnations on the
grassy ground
I tell her I miss her
love her
and hope she knew it before
she called
channel three

Voiceless in November

Kate Hanson

For Denny

All day I heard your name.
It came like a violent strike upon my neck
And broke whispers on my shoulders
As we stood in an open landscape
Like a couple of gray statues,
Our voices slipping silently into the dirt.

The trees with their agonizing stares
Twisted and shook like aching bones;
I shuttered at November's breath.
I secretly cursed its ignorance
While your name was read aloud,
And the sound stung in my ears.

I wanted to tell you we could go somewhere,
Having lived our lives as two ill-fated protagonists
And bohemian breathers;
We always seem to bite our tongues in fear of waking
The wrath that sleeps inside us.

I never thought I'd love him with you.
And then I found myself alone behind a crowd of tears,
Thinking about collapsing to the cold, hard ground
So thin beneath me,
And desperately kissing it until it was soft again.

And I thought about all of the color in this world,
The way it can so easily escape us.
It was as real to me as
My shoes scraping the concrete,
Walking down your street on summer nights,
Our lips pulling hard on cigarettes,
Until we reach the end and walk back again.

The flowers were eating away at the autumn air,
Still thick with sickness,
As we watched him slip into the earth.
I was trying to find the words that could dab the ache away,
Trying to cough up or swallow
Your name that had pasted itself at the back of my throat.

I wanted to tell you we could go somewhere,
If only we could smooth the rough callous prints of this season,
If only we could pack up the words that were burying themselves
Beneath our feet
This life might have something for us.

You didn't speak.
Because you said that if you did,
Your voice would stick to everything around you.
But I could hear the requiem that was living in your chest,
And I studied you until every motion you made was poetry.

I sifted through the jackets
Until I found myself beside you.
The priest repeated your name,
And a sad November breeze passed through us,
A rusty whisper that brushed up against my ear and said

Father



Photo by Lisa Angelo

Jack Kerouac's Ghost

David Daniel

Of what can we be certain except this – that we are fertilized by mysterious circumstances!
– Antoine de Saint-Exupery

I first met Jack Kerouac not long after my second wife and I had moved to Lowell, Massachusetts. We had come from a town nearer Boston when I'd hit the small time and published several novels. The move seemed like a good idea at the time.

Lowell was America's first planned industrial city. Now it's a weary old husk of mills and factories stitched with sluggish canals that flow from the Merrimack River, which runs through the city's heart like a broad liquid arrow. I've sometimes imagined that, with all the red brick and those tangled streets and criss-crossing water, from a vast height Lowell might appear the way Mars did to 19th Century astronomers. From ground level it is old fading advertisements for long gone products from the days when advertisers painted signs right onto the sides of buildings. It is a web of iron bridges and gray streets, of cobblestone and gas lamps, and the acres of old mill buildings, like glum ruminations of the city's past. But there is also a stubborn pride, unbroken and unchanging, from its textile days of old Yankee ingenuity, the era of the mill girls, through the subsequent human waves that washed there—Irish, Greek, French-Canadian, Polish, Russian, Portuguese, Puerto Rican, Cambodian, Laotian, African … Lowell

is a city that has shuffled off many a mortal coil but refused to die.

As a couple, inventing ourselves, Arianna and I found a certain appeal to Lowell. The city was *re*inventing itself, with the preservation of old buildings, government funds being poured into its coffers, and new life and energy being pumped into it veins. There were a national and a state park there, a university and several colleges. Housing was affordable. Even so, going there was an act of faith. The move meant a longer commute to my job teaching English at a college in Boston, and we knew no one in the Merrimack Valley. But I thought that a new place might infuse my other career, as a writer, with fresh ideas. It would be a place for Arianna and me to make a stand. And who knew? Maybe it would bring unexpected discoveries.

As I said, I'd hit the small time. I'd written a little paperback potboiler about a man who keeps his head in the sand and tries to avoid trouble until it's too late. The book might just as well have stayed buried, too. Paperback originals are (or were) the literary equivalent of straight-to-home video, and while there used to be writers who made a living from writing them, the books mostly went unreviewed and had the shelf life of Mayflies. But then I sold a novel to a famous editor who had his own imprint with a major publisher, and he was excited about the book. Sometime later he would move to another house and take me with him, and later still he would get sacked in what became known in New York publishing circles as the Halloween Massacre, but that's a story for later. Through this man, my first exposure to the world of publishing was with a real gentleman. He edited that book and taught me some important things as he readied it for publication.

To prepare for the event, I decided to solicit a blurb from Stephen King. I got his address in Bangor and sent him a letter. He responded with a nice personal letter, something I don't imagine he does much anymore since his mail probably arrives in piles he could bobsled down. In his reply he thanked me for asking; most people, he said, just sent along a book and then pestered him for a plug. He enclosed a piece he'd written in a newspaper in which he made the case that a blurb from him might actually harm a book rather than help it because he'd spread his name around so much. It seemed the only thing he wasn't plugging in those days was the Yellow Pages. And now my novel. But I appreciated that he replied. I'll never know for sure if a blurb from him would have helped or hindered my book or had no effect at all. It was early in his career. Even earlier in mine.

As a canny preemptive move to avert an avalanche of attention, I had given the most minimal "about the author" jacket copy that I could think of. Book cover bios often say that writer X "lives in (name a city)... with (wife/ husband/partner) and (cat/dog/kids), and I always read perfect domestic contentment into that. At the time, I was estranged from my first wife, and our domestic situation was anything but content. My book's dust flap said that the author "lives near Boston where he teaches college." That simple.

As with not having a blurb from Stephen King, I don't know it such a brief bio helped, hindered or had no effect, either. The reviews were very good. Excellent in fact. I did none of the dog-and-pony book signings in malls ("author events" hadn't become common yet, and frankly I knew virtually nothing about self-promotion). I continued to work at my profession as a teacher at a small Boston college (interviewers sometimes read that as "Boston College," which didn't make me any too confident about their reading abilities). There was no deluge. And anyway, I'd just changed addresses at that point, my first marriage having ended shortly after the book came out. The book sold thirteen thousand copies, a modest number that seemed to please everyone

The next book took less time to write, and it too got good reviews and went to paperback reprint. In this period I also met the woman who would become my now wife. Then we got engaged and decided to make a new start in a new place.

Save for several years away to Maine, and to Texas for the Army, and later to Oregon, I'd lived in Massachusetts most of my life, having been born in Boston and grown up on the South Shore. But I'd never been to Lowell. In my mind it was one of those old dead industrial cities whose carcasses litter the New England landscape. I'd seen Brockton, Fall River, New Bedford, Holyoke, Haverhill and Lynn; renaissance or not, what did I need with Lowell?

The first time I visited the city, my fiancé and I went into a bar called the Dubliner. It was August and the bar was promoting its "Only half a year till St. Patty's Day!" festivities. On the walls were pictures of Jack Kennedy, of course, James Joyce and even John Lennon (Rest in Peace all), and that was cool—but no Jack Kerouac? Here in his native city? Only later would I come to understand this odd oversight.

* * *

Arianna and I got married and bought a house, an ancient fixer-upper that we poured our money and happy energies into. Eventually, I determined it was time to buckle down to the next book. As soon as I found a good idea.

In Lowell, after I would come home from Boston for the day, I'd haunt the late afternoon streets, confident that a book would form in my imagination. And depending on which neighborhood of the city I'd be roaming in of a particular jaunt, ideas would come. With westering light lacquering the long brick mill buildings, turning the windows to copper scale, I'd think: I'll do a big family yarn, the main character will be a descendent of the Yankee mill owners. Then the gleeful excitements and rich cookery aromas of another neighborhood would set me to considering a saga with Portuguese protagonists, say, or a story that starts in Phnom Penh, perhaps, and comes here to Lowell, and . . .

Next evening I'd be thinking something else, my characters would be different folks, with other troubles, different yearnings. There was a little mental baby boom in effect, like something was knocking up my mind. I felt pregnant with people. The book in my head kept shapeshifting as the streets and neighborhoods whispered their secret stories to my listening ear. I kept roaming, confident that the right story would come.

One night I was walking and I saw to my surprise that Nicky's was still there. Or the sign was anyway. Nicky's had been a rough and tumble workers' bar that had belonged to Nick Sampas, whose sister Stella had been Jack Kerouac's third wife. A story I'd heard was that when Jack was in Lowell on one of his infrequent and unpredictable visits to the city, and was drinking (which wasn't infrequent or unpredictable), Nicky would lock up at closing time and let Jack stay there safe overnight to sleep on a pool table.

Stories go around, and whether they're 100% real (as they seldom are) or 100% false (as they almost never are), they're *basically* true. Or, as I tell my daughter, whose twelve-year-old's mind is in a constant state of cross examination whenever I recount a story for her, it's probably not all true, but it's not all lies either.

Anyway, Nicky's, at 110 Gorham Street, was closed by this time, its grimy windows soaped with FOR LEASE and a hopeful realtor's phone number, but the bar's weathered sign still hung.

Time and *Newsweek* had run stories about how the city was undergoing a renaissance, and I suppose if you spoke to the popular Lowell native Sen. Paul Tsongas (RIP) and other local boosters, and looked in the right places, the term certainly did apply. (And by the way, Tsongas was the genuine article. I'd see him weeding flowerbeds in a small city park that he and his family had undertaken to care for, and he'd be as friendly as any other neighbor, though I always sensed there was sadness about the man, a quality of inner longing for something that couldn't be—a better world

perhaps; or maybe that was just the knowing that the looming Dark Rider can bring.) Anyway, not every part of the city qualified for the four-color Chamber of Commerce brochures. Downtown, real estate was in a slump; given that there were a million square feet of useable mill space available, places didn't rent all that quickly. For example, when we moved there, there was this one boarded up store front whose sign said The Male Stop, which I took to have been an adult bookstore; turned out it was a trendy men's clothing store. Fooled me. Anyway, when it died, no one bothered to take the sign down. It must've been there for five years after the place closed. That's how slow real estate downtown was.

But seeing Nicky's, remembering the name from my reading, I got a little excited. I went over and, after pausing a moment to properly appreciate the shabby landmark before me, I put my hands against the dusty plate glass and peered in.

The interior was filled with a murky darkness, as if night had already fallen in there and was slowly making its way outside. It seemed to cling to ceiling and walls, but there was one light on in the back, a security light, I guessed, Lowell being a place where beat cops still rattled doorknobs and beamed flashlights into afterdark stores. Through the window I could just make out the ghost-sheeted shapes of a pool table and bar stools and...suddenly I realized there was a person in there, too.

Startled, I stepped back. I was a moment recovering from my surprise; then, uncertain but overcome with curiosity, I peered in once more. Sure enough, a man was sitting in there at the bar. He was facing the backbar, visible to me in quarter profile. He had a fedora tipped back on his head, his elbow resting on the bar, a cigarette scissored in his fingers. Smoke raveled slowly up into the still air. He seemed to be in deep thought. Something in the pose was familiar, and then I knew why. Look at the black and white photograph on the cover of *Lonesome Traveler* and you will too.

I'm not the kind of person who approaches celebrities. Years ago, in a Los Angeles office tower, I found myself alone in an elevator with Steve McQueen (RIP). He was a small, compact man, neatly attired in faded jeans, white shirt and a denim jacket. I noted him, noted his noting my noting him, and we rode several wordless floors together as any two strangers might, respectful of each other's space. To be honest, I sensed something trip-wired about McQueen, like if I *had* spoken to him, it might've ended in us having a hassle; though that could just be my buying the press accounts.

But here (I thought) was Jack Kerouac, Lowell native son and legendary King of the Beats. He didn't look to be going anywhere, so maybe

just a quick hello, read your stuff, big fan, good to meet you…

I took a deep breath, tried the door handle, which proved to be unlocked, and stepped in.

A lamp of amber globed glass fed a pale glow into the dim room, revealing, just barely, a scattering of tables and chairs, two sheet-covered pool tables, a boxy, sheeted shape in the corner, and the bar. That's where the man was sitting. He turned at my entrance, took a drag of his cigarette, which bloomed in the semi-darkness like a small orange flower, and peered at me. I knew for sure then that it was Jack Kerouac. I stopped on the tattered carpet and raised a hand to show I was friendly.

"Hi, I uh…" I gestured toward the door, suddenly stumbling for words. "I looked in and saw—well, I…just wanted to say hi."

Kerouac did nothing to ease my discomfort. He watched me, his tongue roving exploratorily inside his cheek as if he'd just chewed a mouthful of peanuts. In the back of the room something chirped softly away, like a lone cricket italicizing the awkward silence. "Well, then…" I started backing toward the entrance.

Kerouac rubbed a hand across his stubbled chin, cocked one eye in scrutiny, and said, "What're you drinking?"

It stopped me. The backbar shelves looked to be empty of anything except perhaps rodent droppings, but I saw he had a glass before him, ice cubes dissolving in its pale brown contents. "Got a beer?" I asked.

He pushed off the stool and went behind the bar. I walked over. He bent and pulled open a small refrigerator, which I realized was the source of the soft cricket sound. His face lit with the interior light, and for the first time I realized his eyes were a startling light blue. I'd always imagined them to be dark.

"What kind you want?" he asked.

"Anything but Bud, I guess."

"Give me a name."

"Sam Adams?" He was squinting into the box. "Or a Heineken?"

"Try again."

"Got a Mill City in there?" It was brewed right there in town.

"Keep going."

"Blue Ribbon?"

"Uh uh. Bud," he said.

"Bud's good."

He drew out a longneck, popped off the cap on an opener mounted on the edge of the bar, and handed it over. "Glass?"

I had begun to perceive the bar's aging cologne of musty carpet, stale beer and mentholated tobacco smoke. "No thanks."

He refilled his own glass with brandy and lifted it, sparkling brown in the light. "The blood of Christ," he intoned sepulchrally, "shed for you."

What did you say to that? I touched his glass with the beer bottle and drank.

If I'd worried about icebreakers to get a conversation started, I needn't have. He set his glass nearby, forked a cigarette out of a dwindling pack, offered me one, which I declined, and lit up.

"This used to be an ale town, Lowell," he said, whiffing smoke. "Harvard Brewing was here, this great big brick shadowy industrial brewery, with the wagons and the steaming copper kettles and hundreds of people working there making that good strong-bodied ale, the creaking wagons and the *basso profundo* of the shift whistles would punctuate the day and in my child-mind I would imagine river monsters breaking wind, wind that would have the aroma of hops as it came across the city and I'd smell it on Beaulieu Street, all the way over in Centralville. But after the war, guys came back from Europe and all of sudden they wanted lager and pilsner, took the fizz right out of the ale trade. I don't understand the difference, something to do with the hops being fermented at the top or the bottom, but don't ask me what. Ale's heavier."

"As long as they drink good," I said, "I'm happy."

"You ready?"

I'd had about two sips.

"Harvard kept brewing ale for a while, but it was shoveling Jell-O with a pitchfork." I smiled at the image. He took another knock of brandy. "The way writing can get to be sometimes," he went on, having shifted gears. "In the years after *The Town and the City* came out, I finished a bunch of novels, but they weren't the lost-and-by-the-wind-grieved-ghost echoes of Thomas Wolfe I'd had going in *The Town*, and no publisher was interested, and damn sure not many readers had eyes for that first one—it didn't sell shit. Still, I went on writing them, couldn't stop myself, but it *was*, man—shoveling Jell-O with a pitchfork."

"But what Jell-O!" I said, near reverence in my voice, thinking: what if he had gone on doing what he'd done in *The Town and the City* and hadn't invented the New Thing, his spontaneous bebop poetics? His books would be dusty ten-cent treasures in old book barns, props in furniture warehouse living room displays. "Those novels, they must've been what, *On the Road*, obviously. *Mexico City Blues*, *Dr. Sax*?"

"Some of those, yeah. *The Subterraneans*."

"*Visions of Cody*."

"I was calling it *Visions of Neal* back then." He was scrutinizing me again, the bright blue eyes alert.

"But when *On the Road* came out, wow!"

"It was seven long years after the first strike till then. You want to talk about second book blues?"

"That's the one you were born to write!"

He scoffed. "No one's born to write anything. You grow to write a book."

I took his meaning. But after *On the Road*, I pointed out, he was a made man. He didn't look happy with remembering. "Everybody demanded more product. I cranked off *The Dharma Bums* in a few weeks thinking, this'll hold 'em for a while." He rounded the ashes off his cigarette. "It didn't. Couldn't. And I was sunk then. It was years before I wrote the next one. When they hang that 'genius' sign around your neck you're done."

It was one less thing to worry about in the still watches of the night I bent nearer. "What was it like though—that rocket to success?"

"To doom, maybe. You want holy fire, and people come at you sideways. Imagine a photo with a big arrow pointing to your keester that says 'Kiss me' and another arrow to your face that says, 'Kick me!' And that's what they do. *Hard!* Then, after awhile you get all the academic heavy breathing—buncha ivory tower ineffectuals! But that's another story."

God. Was that how I was coming off? Like a kiss ass? I sat back determined to sound a cooler note. "Well, it's still got to be better than shoveling Jell-O with a pitchfork."

He gave a crooked grin. "Or pounding tacks with a sledgehammer."

"Or hunting tigers with a bb gun?"

"Panning for gold with a bottle cap."

"How about making ale when da people wants beer!" I said.

He spanked the bar. "Figurative language spoken here. You ready bud?"

This time I was. He fetched me another and went on talking. And I went on listening. It was like having plugged a fistful of silver into a juke box that just plays oldies. It was an "amazing rap," as my Army photographer friend Crawfish used to say when someone really got cranking with war stories, and it went on until I reluctantly said I had to go. My bride would be envisioning me bobbing facedown in one of the canals. Jack walked me over and opened the door. For the first time, he asked my name.

"Hugh Henry," I said.

He stuck out his hand. I looked at it: a hand that had written over a million words, that had lugged footballs and volumes of Proust, clutched the ladders of fast moving freight trains, passed poorboys of muscatel around hobo campfires, thrust its thumb into many a gritty highway wind, cupped sweet white and brown and black breasts, flipped off a generation of mass-mind muggles, and beckoned to generations to follow. I shook it.

I waved goodnight. As he started to lock the door, he said, "If you're around again, drop by."

I promised.

Majestik Linen

Paul Marion

In a subterranean room roaring like a jet,
Sunday workers feed or unload machines,
busy in twos and threes at their stations —
all hands more colorful than the linen.
Plain as old-time mill operatives, they handle cloth by the mile:
nursing home pillow cases, dinner napkins, green scrubs from the ER,
loved sheets, double-bleached butchers' aprons, hotel towels,
well-fed tablecloths from a club luncheon.
The linen workers take it in and send it on — their canvases unsigned.
Young woman catches my face in the window.
Instead of giving her a wave, any kind of salute,
I freeze like a common eavesdropper.
She turns back to her work, what most of us won't see
unless we're in the Flats at the hour of the early Mass,
following the drone of automatic washers
to a sunrise service recognized worldwide.
Their names are in the phone book with ours.
We get the job done. We know the drill by heart.
We press and fold the linen before it is loaded onto trucks,
bound for back doors across the city.

The Cut

Paul Marion

Color is late this year.
It's Halloween, and just yesterday I savored
an old maple on campus whose leaves,
like yellow-orange candy corn,
got switched on overnight.
Great masses of gold and russet leaped
off the evergreen sidewalls of Route 3 this morning —
a gift to the rushing audience at the heavy equipment opera,
now in year two of its North Middlesex run.
In the bulldozers and fierce extractors,
which rip out thick trees by the roots,
operators chew up the job list.
Hills of wood chips smoke day and night,
In my back yard, the eighty-foot fir
shows pale circles where I sawed limbs in June.
The top boughs shelter huge crows.
Sap leaks and glistens at each slice.
Bound to scab over the raw, bound to close up like lips,
the bark has already begun its move.

Kirk Street

Adam Hogue

I sit
homeless on Kirk Street,
with my rattling can,
with my two cents.
I look at the school,
I look at the church,
you both failed me.
The brick in the street,
the park to my left,
the homeless man to my right,
"What do you want," I ask?
"I want what you have,
an education and good looks!"

I look at him
with fire in my eyes,
"I have nothing
of which you speak."

I look around
and everywhere
the chained kids play.

What You Did Friday Night

Heather Szafran

Everyone goes home in October. Sal knew it, and said as much; it's one of those things that you always knew you knew, but never realized until you started back toward wherever you came from. And home, you decide, is where or what you make it. October's the perfect month for nostalgia, reminiscing, melancholy reflections, thinking how things could have worked differently if only ya woulda ... Piece by piece you regain your composure, you pull yourself together, and decide to rejoin society: the perfect solution for the doldrums accompanying thoughts of an impending grey winter.

So a FIX is in order, something to bring you back to yer roots, both geographically and intellectually, something that'll put in a plug and stop the torrent of energy that's been leaking out all SeptemberAugustJuly long; and you find a little blue paper, on which is written that there is
an open mike
hosted by John Sinclair
at the Worthen
tonite
to kick off
the Lowell Celebrates Kerouac! festival.

Such ambiguity sparks interest; you don your leather coat, to which smoke is less likely to cling, and step out arm-in-arm with your significant other. And so you arrive, your dad's thirty-five-year-old stories of celery salt and mustard placed on every table to dress up the (in)famous Worthen beer-boiled hot dogs fresh on your mind. Who is this John Sinclair, your

prospective MC? What's his link to the movement called Beat?

Skinny scrawny kid in the doorway checks your ID; blusey-rocky-noise-ish stuff explodes out the door when you open it; there is no celery salt, there are no hot dogs. The bar is out of mugs and pitchers, and serves beer in Dixie cups. There is a white-haired goateed gentleman in his mid-fifties growling and shouting into a microphone, stalking back and forth, gesticulating wildly, waving a handful of papers in the faces of the rapt audience. He shouts about drugs and the government and sometimes looks somehow younger than he is as he thunders forth. His spectators are enthralled; they are entranced. They follow his every move, punctuating his phrases with shouts of assent. They wear berets and suede vests; you are far below the mean age of the other attendees.

Sinclair perspires; drops are crystals popping out on his forehead. His glasses reflect embers of cigarettes, his black hooded Cannabis Cup sweatshirt hugs his American belly. As he rages on in front of his backup band of indeterminate genre, they grind on and on. You realize that your ears have not yet become accustomed to the huge noise of the bar: the band the poet the lovers fighting the few mugs and pitchers falling to the floor... You have great difficulty understanding exactly what is being said; you absorb Sinclair's words through osmosis, through the thick stale air; the mood in the place is perfect for what's happening. Elderly two-bladed ceiling fans, ingeniously belt-driven and spinning in unison, push the rising funk back down toward the crowd. The physical proximity of all these freaks here to celebrate Kerouac (you and your significant other among them, don't you forget), the mug-deficient bar-maids, the stickiness of the floor, being cornered by John and Kenneth who're down from Maine...you almost don't need to have an MC who articulates properly. The air is thick with the meaning that his words surely hold; he is the cherry on top of the Worthen-fudge-sundae.

So you and your significant other find an abandoned pitcher that the bartender refills; you find a table from which you can observe Sinclair and the other poets. This table though is already occupied by Tim who worked at One World Trade, Paul who must have been a crazy cat lady in another life, and Lucy the phony Australian with the circa-1962 pancake makeup, lip liner, and too-black hair. You decide that these people are perfect compliments to the unhinged-ness the lolls around you. You start conversations, as much as can be said between shouts from the stage where other writers tout their wares. Beautiful soft smoky warm barely-sufficient light softens Lucy's life-hardened face as David Amram, in a pleasant unexpected surprise, gets up on stage laden with penny whistles and djembes and a French horn. He is oblivious to the cacophony when he plays on, smiling a sweet smile the whole night, like he swallowed a butterfly and it now lives in his soul. He is gracious in between Sinclair's sets when he makes rounds, sitting at your table for a time, talking and laughing and being generally gracious to complete strangers.

It is late; it is loud. The beer is consumed pitcher by pitcher instead of mug by mug. The poets get looser and looser, the line between art and silliness is in some cases hopelessly blurred. Your significant other is engrossed in a conversation about the great Scranton banana disaster, immortalized in that Harry Chapin song. You still focus on the stage.

A kid of twenty-one or two, red stage lights reflecting off his shaved head, takes the mike, shouts and screams, falls into a mantra of "lesbian housewives!" For ten solid minutes he repeats his tag-line; you laugh and roll your eyes, mostly in relief that events like this can exist in a town such as Lowell, and that this kid has so little concern. It is a good-natured, hopeful laugh. You laugh so hard you cough. You cough ferociously, thinking your lungs will start bleeding any minute now. And around you your table-mates discuss the urban myths associated with the 30,000 lbs. of bananas. You bend your head toward the only open window, drinking in the intermittently wafting cool fall air; it is salve for your lungs.

Tim leans forward excitedly, moving subconsciously to the band's rhythm, eyes bugging, smoke curling from his mouth. He expresses how allergic he is to smoke, how it makes him choke, too...and blows a lungful directly at you. The music is so loud only bits and pieces of the next poet's words reach you; the bass drum is your heartbeat: you can't help but groove.

There is lunacy and humanness and brilliant ideas and subversiveness and drunkenness and an edgy sort of high all around you; it is just enough to resign you to thoughts that home is where you make it, and in a sense this place and these people and this smoky night are it.

Whatever that means.



Photo by Michael Weinbeck

Fringe Poem

Hilary Holladay

No one disputes that America is overpopulated;
too many people are eating doughnuts, littering
the highway, going on mindless vacations in oversized cars.

We're getting fatter and dumber with every mile.

I've seen drivers lick sugar off their fingers as they
roll over animals flattened on the road.
They have no clue what negative capability is.

Their minds, achieving this perfect emptiness, shine
like silver platters on Feast Day, awaiting great quantities
of grapes and pears, Brie and petit fours.

They are as receptive as damp sheets flapping in a stiff wind.

When these Chosen Ones exit off I-95,
smart Martians giggle into their pistachio hands,
then swoop down, steal the best and brightest kidneys.

Wonder Bread

Scott Jobling

I'm realizing why I don't like Wonder Bread.
Oh no, don't get me wrong, it tastes fine.
But as I look to my peanut-butter and jelly
I think:
"You my soft bleached flour friend, you are the runt of the edible processed wheats.
You are too small.
I try to fill you up and make up for it, but it makes not a bit of difference.
I wish to devour your whole family in that bag and be left with crumbs.
But it makes no difference now.
I have already put the loaf away.
And I am left with you,
my index card size dinner.
Why can't you grow? Hold more peanut-butter? Grasp more jelly?
RISE UP AMONG YOUR CARBOHYDRATE FILLED BROTHERS!
And be giant.
But it is only a dream.
You lay on my plate,
Across the room,
On my desk
Small
Unfinished
Tasty."
Mmmm
I wish I'd made two.

Rational Men Starve

Benjamin Hanson

"*La hambre.*" They were the only Spanish words he knew. He took them straight from the new Mister Taco commercial, the one with the talking chimpanzee that runs around with a yellow sombrero on his head and a Mister Taco cape rigged to his back. The commercial focuses on the hard-working people in the downtown area who haven't got a clue as to what they want to eat for lunch. When all hope appears to be lost, the grinning ape waddles up to them and says, "*la hambre.*" Eventually, the nine-to-fivers end up at Mister Taco with toothy smiles on their faces. The sixty-second spot concludes with the caption "Because rational men starve." Charlie saw the commercial a few weeks ago, and being the curious boy he is, he went straight to his mom and popped the question.

"Mom, what's *la hambre*?" He spoke the words like a true Sweet Junctionite, never having been subjected to any language but his own.

"It's Spanish for itching for something to eat," she responded with her back turned, occupied with the nightly ritual of setting alight each votive candle that lined their mantel.

In less than a month, the commercial had caught on throughout Charlie Hooper's community. Most kids his age knew what "*la hambre*" meant; for the most part, the difficulty lay in rolling the r like the talking monkey. But now, after about thirteen years of three square meals a day and an endless gorging of snacks in between, Charlie knew how "*la hambre*" felt.

It was a windswept April evening. He stared out the window of the church basement. There was but one, and it was very small and covered

with the dirt and dust of a century of janitorial neglect. Outside, the sun was setting. By nature, Charlie was a sensitive lover of the beautiful, but not on this day. Instead, everything he saw was edible. The brown darkness of the ground was his thick slice of whole wheat bread with the corners shaved off. The strip of pink right where the sun met the trees was his slice of Oscar Meyer bologna. And the yellows and oranges were the slices of American cheese and generous globs of mustard and mayonnaise. If only he could take a bite.

Because, unfortunately, Charlie was a student in a Sunday school class that was temporarily severed from all ties with food—bologna sandwiches included. It was not that he wasn't a true believer or that he didn't have any faith. He was sure that he possessed at least some faith, or *half-faith,* as his mom told him once as they sat together in a church pew.

"Charlie, you may believe that there is a God, but until you profess your devotion to Him, you are but of half-faith in His eyes." He was discouraged to say the least. He endured that entire homily without as much as a nod.

As a believer, Charlie was a member of the Sweet Junction Roman Catholic church, Our Lady of Perpetual Forgiveness. His mother saw to it that he participated in all religious and quasi religious activities that came his way, including the Biannual Fast for Awareness, a twenty-four-hour food consumption stoppage that was meant to mirror the suffering that takes place in less fortunate places around the world. Charlie promised that he would only take part in the fast if the faculty had to starve as well. His mom assured him that this was a stipulation of the program.

As the hour hand neared eight o'clock, Charlie and his entire Sunday school class sat Indian-style in a circle on the basement floor. They each took turns chanting that magical expression while woeful sounds of hunger emanated from beneath their shirts and blouses.

"*La hambre. La hambre. La hambre.*"

In the middle of their ring, a sheer mountain of board games was mangled together in an indistinguishable pile of tiny game pieces and colorful cards on the soft beige carpet—Monopoly, Chutes and Ladders, Battleship, and their favorite, Hungry, Hungry Hippo. Charlie glanced up at the clock and recited a little prayer he invented for the occasion:

"I love you Lord/ And I won't stop/ Just as long as you/ Speed up that blessed clock."

"*La hambre*" was his classmates' Amen.

"Listen," lisped Maureen Apple, the girl to Charlie's right. "Maybe we could summon Mister Taco and a heaping platter of his Turkey Dinner Burritos?" Charlie knew why she had trouble articulating certain sounds—it had to do with one of the four body piercings she was said to have. Her tongue ring and her liberal religious beliefs made her the perfect candidate to lead the sacrilegious incantation.

"*La hambre. La hambre. La ham—*"

Clunk...clunk...clunk. Their chanting ceased. The only sound that could be heard was the din of heavy footsteps upon the staircase leading into the basement. The students looked at each other and frowned.

"Be quiet," said Charlie, "it's her."

Their Sunday school teacher, Ms. Stonewall, was not exactly light in the sneakers—she had the biggest feet Charlie had ever seen. No matter what size of shoe she wore, it always seemed to him that her feet were aching to bust through the plastic and rubber, kind of like one of those mammoth wrestlers on TV whose body is so big and burly that nothing fits him, not stretchy Spandex, not even a Hefty trash bag.

At the bottom of the stairs, she stopped in her tracks and glared in the direction of the circle from behind her horn-rimmed glasses. She trembled like a bull, steaming at the nose and frothing at the mouth. She had piercing red eyes and a set of forearms that resembled a bundle of two by fours. Her legs were as thick as her arms. And what was more intimidating was the fact that Charlie could not find one feminine attribute on Ms. Stonewall's entire body—she was as broad-shouldered and as solid as a body builder.

"Excuse me children, did I hear someone partaking in a pagan rite?" Her mouth, like a hot iron stovepipe, propelled her fiery breath across the room and tickled Charlie's cheeks.

"No, ma'am," replied Maureen, "we were only saying *la hambre.*"

"I trust that my herd of helpless little sheep isn't cursing in foreign tongues to deceive me. That would be considered a grievous sin. And don't even think about attempting to rummage for a snack. I'm keeping an eye on you." Stonewall removed her glasses and pointed her beefy index finger at her gleaming eyes.

"Hey teach, who's going to keep an eye on you?" murmured Charlie under his breath, gawking at her projecting belly.

With a breathy grunt, the Sunday school teacher spun and retreated up the stairs.

"How long do we have left?" A familiar voice broke the silence. Almost simultaneously, Charlie felt a nudge in his left side—it was his longtime classmate, Mikey. Charlie supposed that Mikey would be the ideal friend if it weren't for the fact that he asked so many darned ques-

tions.

"Why do we have to do this fast thing? Can't we have a little to eat? What does starving ourselves have to do with religion and God anyway? Can I convert to a new religion? Do other religions do this type of stuff?" Mikey kept on and on, and Charlie didn't stop him. If Charlie was labeled as possessing half-faith, then that meant that Mikey barely made quarter-faith. Mikey had squeaked through First Communion by the skin of his teeth.

"We can't eat," replied Charlie, "because we go to this church. Plain and simple. It stinks, but we have to—" He cut himself off. His friend's smirking face caught him by surprise.

"Charlie, I'm going to die if I don't show you this." Mikey carefully pressed down on his pant pocket, revealing the rough outline of a Mister Taco Meat Rollup.

Charlie's mouth watered as he signaled the need for caution and secrecy. "It's time that we feed *la hambre*—because rational men starve!" he exclaimed, snickering like the Satan he had imagined ruling in the depths of Hell, brimming with scorn and red with temptation's delight. He then used his newfound deviousness to concoct a most wicked scheme. He addressed the group: "Hey everyone, do you know what, up until now, I had completely forgot? A long time ago, a very trustworthy kid once told me that the white little balls that the hippos try to gobble up in Hungry, Hungry Hippo—you know, that board game—they're really those sour balls you can buy at the candy—" He cut himself off. He could not finish his lie. But all at once, those hunger-crazed fools dove into the pile of toys and games. Boards flew. Scattered pieces everywhere. Child-safe plastic broken under trampling tennis shoes. Charlie stood aside, admiring the result of his quick thinking. Even Mikey took the bait.

Grabbing his friend by the loose threads of his sweater, Charlie managed to lift Mikey and pull him away from the famished hordes. He then whispered a series of short uncomplicated instructions into his ear: "Be alert. Be quiet. Make your way to the bathroom door. I'm right behind you." The basement bathroom had one toilet, one sink, and one of those cast iron hand dryers that Charlie used on wintry days to dry his wet hat and mittens. More importantly, the door of the bathroom could be locked.

Click. Charlie pulled Mikey into the bathroom and locked the silver doorknob behind him. He then put his ear to the door, making certain the group's search for the non-existent candy was continuing. "Boy," uttered Charlie, "they're desperate."

"Aren't we desperate too?" Mikey reached into his front pocket and

grabbed at the meat rollup. The crumpling noise it produced triggered Charlie's mouth-watering mechanism. "Mr. *Hambre*, meet Mr. Rollup." Mikey revealed it in his outstretched hand. They both stared at the magnificent prize, shimmering beneath the glow of a 60-watt light bulb.

Like the cigar-smoking actor in his favorite Western, Charlie pressed the meat rollup—still contained within its wrapper—to his nose and took an elongated sniff. He started on one end of the bar and worked his way to the other and back again, inhaling its scent along the way.

"The smell itself," said Charlie, "is enough to quench my hunger pangs."

"Don't you think it's about time we opened that thing?"

"With twelve hours left," replied Charlie, "this meat rollup is all we got—we can't just wolf it down. What'll we do later?"

Unwilling to rationalize, Mikey yanked it from Charlie's hand and began to split it down the middle.

"Half-faith! Half-faith!" said the voice in Charlie's mind, *"Half-faith! Half-faith!"*

"Wait!" Charlie grabbed it back. "We've worked so hard to starve ourselves up to this point. Why do you want to ruin everything by eating this greasy old meat rollup?"

"Why not? I thought you were hungry."

"It's not worth ruining an entire day of self-restraint."

"Self-re—what? Will you speak English?"

"How about 'self-control?' Do you understand that?"

"Charlie, it only weighs a half an ounce. God will never notice that, especially when it hits our small intestines."

"That's not the point."

"But there's only one gram of fat. I eat that much every time I bite my fingernails or chew the inside of my lip."

"Listen. I don't want to be a half-faith all of my life."

"Your mind is fluc-she-ate-ing!"

"Yes, I am fluctuating!"

"But...But—," Mikey pleaded as he fumbled with the wrapper, "there's zero percent calcium in this Burger Bar. That's the same amount of calcium there is in air. That means—"

"Mikey, for once, think about what you're saying. That meat rollup isn't going to solve—"

"Who's in there?" a voice thundered from outside the bathroom door. It was so loud that it vibrated the metal hinges and silver doorknob. Plop. Charlie tossed the meat rollup into the toilet bowl. Mikey pressed

the lever, flushing the evidence. Then, Charlie instinctively knocked the button on the cast iron hand dryer and grabbed the plunger, hoisting it into his arms like a soldier preparing for combat. Mikey turned the knob and the door opened. From above Ms. Stonewall's face stared down as fierce and as unmerciful as ever at the plunger.

"What are you two doing?" The veins that ran along both of her temples were jumping up and down.

"Ms. Stonewall, I was helping Mikey unclog the toilet. He didn't know how to use this thing." Charlie smiled and proudly held up the plunger.

"Yeah," said Mikey, "Charlie's a really smart kid."

"If that is the case, then why is the end of the plunger as dry as a bone?" Ms. Stonewall's grimace grew meaner, and her eyebrows drew closer together.

"Dry? What? It's dry?" Charlie's eyes opened wide as he looked at the plunger, then at Stonewall and Mikey.

"Well," said Mikey, "the toilet—it was really clogged—"

"Yeah, it was so clogged that, you know, there was no water flowing in that hole." Charlie pointed to toilet bowl.

"That's where Charlie came in." Mikey patted his friend's shoulder.

"Yeah, Mikey really plugged that thing up good."

"And there was no avoiding it," said Mikey, "not after eating all that—"

Charlie sank his elbow bone into his friend's side.

"You two can stop right there and get back to the group. Children that lie have to work extra hard to get into heaven. You do want to go to heaven—don't you?"

"Yes, Ms. Stonewall." The boys retreated to the circle of students. Ms. Stonewall sighed and left, allowing Charlie and his classmates to get back to concentrating on the fast. Charlie, however, could not concentrate. Instead, he walked back and forth in the center of the circle.

After much deliberation, he exclaimed, "That's it! I'm marching right up those crummy stairs and telling that teacher of ours that she doesn't need to worry about us lying, eating, or whatever. If she can go without eating, then we can. We're darn good kids and we wouldn't be here if we weren't. I don't need food. You don't need food. And it's obvious that Stonewall doesn't need food either!" The group acknowledged him with a silent ovation, but Charlie didn't stay long enough to accept it—he took Mikey by the hand and made for the stairs. At the top, he stopped at the door with the nameplate "Stonewall" written in big block letters across its façade.

"I'm not going in there. You can't make me." Mikey writhed, attempting to squirm his way out of Charlie's grip.

"You're coming with me, you wimp. Our names are going to be on the lips of students at this Sunday school forever."

Crunch. Chomp.

"Charlie, keep quiet and listen."

Crunch. Crunch. Chomp. Chomp.

"What's that noise?" whispered Mikey.

"I don't know," replied Charlie. "Is it mice?"

"Can't be. Mice are usually a bit quieter than that. Maybe it's a paper shredder?"

"No, silly," said Charlie, "a paper shredder sounds the same all of the time. This sound is fluctuating."

"Fluc-she-ate-ing like your mind?"

Crunch. Chomp. Crunch. Chomp.

"Hey," whispered Charlie, "there it is again."

"We should open the door and see if Ms. Stonewall is all right," said Mikey. "It sounds as if her breathing is fluc-she-ate-ing."

"Fine. I'll do it. Besides, she's always reminding us about her Open Door policy." Charlie tried to turn the doorknob, but to his surprise it was locked.

Inside the room, there was a noise that resembled a stumble and heavy footsteps approaching the door. "Now what are you two up to?" Stonewall cracked open the door so that half of her face was visible.

"Nothing, Ms. Stonewall," replied Charlie. He was startled, but stood fast. Mikey, on the other hand, would have made a run for it if Charlie didn't have a hold of the back of his shirt. "Mikey heard a weird sound coming from your office, and we wanted to make sure you were okay."

"Don't worry about me. You had better worry about yourselves and behave like the others!" Ms. Stonewall revealed her teeth and scowled at the boys. After eyeing her wretched fangs, Charlie stepped back in fear, letting go the hold he had on Mikey's shirt. This, in turn, triggered Mikey to plow headfirst into Stonewall's door, causing it to swing wide open and reveal all that was inside.

Charlie, in a daze, looked into Stonewall's room and caught a glimpse of the extraordinary. On her desk sat a wrinkled bag. But it was not just any bag. It was decorated with the grinning face of a chimpanzee and a few words that were made unreadable by several grease spots pro-

duced by what secrets lay within. Charlie was positive the bag belonged to the local Mister Taco, making the words obscured by the grease too obvious. "*La hambre.*"

"Is that what I think it is?" asked Charlie.

Ms. Stonewall stood speechless.

"No," said Mikey, "this isn't happening, not after the mess we've been through. We've listened to you and your empty beliefs—we haven't touched a crumb, not even when we had the chance to."

"He's right," replied Charlie. "It's taken this spoiled starvation for me to realize that you, Ms. Stonewall, are as human and as hungry as we are."

"You know," continued Mikey, "there's a word for two-faced Sunday school teachers like you—you're *Hippocratic.*"

"The word is hypocritical, you dummy."

"I mean *hypercritical.*"

"I give up," sighed Charlie.

"For goodness sake, you're beginning to sound a lot like me. You hungry?" Stonewall reached into her pocket and revealed a half-eaten burrito.

"Is she serious?" asked Mikey.

"No, she can't be," said Charlie.

"Would you boys lighten up? Here, take a bite." Stonewall held the burrito close to Charlie's nose. It didn't take long for his face to glow like a neon sign in front of a fast food restaurant.

"One bite's enough for me—," said Mikey, "God's eyesight can't be what it used to."

In a matter of minutes, the whole class, now bubbly and relaxed, found their seats around Stonewall's desk. Before them lay a dazzling assortment of take-out fast foods—Mister Taco included. Now was no time for recriminating. Time to say grace and to recognize the less fortunate.

They all joined in, "...And finally, let us pray that someday there be a cure for *world hambre.*"

Charlie Hooper was convinced that the talking monkey would have a part in finding the cure; an animal that smart is bound to have other talents in his repertoire.

The Great American Poet

Adam Hogue

I am the Great American Poet.
Why?
Because I said so.
I'm the Great American Poet.
Who is going to say I am not?
Even if everyone will disagree.
Well,
My mother still says I'm the best.

The Lighter Side of Getting Screwed Over

Michael Weinbeck

For about eight months during my senior year of high school, I worked at Nashua News in the Quail Run mall. For seven dollars an hour I mopped the floors, stocked the shelves and the humidor, worked the register, kicked out kids who looked at porn, and basically did everything the manager just didn't feel like doing. During my time there, I was forced to endorse tobacco products, cater to rude customers, and take my food breaks in the smoky back room, where, technically, no smoking was allowed. It was a disgusting place, and I wish my disgust ended there.

Because it was a tobacco shop, Nashua News offered cigars, pipes, and lighters of all types. The prices people would pay for this paraphernalia were limited only by the number of idiotic reasons they could contrive to explain their frivolous spending. One extravagant lighter, gold and ebony and ugly, could be bought for roughly five hundred dollars. Duane D. Dennis, my manager, raved about it. I wanted nothing to do with it.

One day, after about six months of employment at the store, I walked in on time to begin my three to ten shift. Duane, who would be there until five, glared at me. Glaring was not unusual for him; he did it to anyone and everyone whenever he was in a bad mood. I tried to look nice and innocent, and then I gave him a playful glare back, hoping to avoid his wrath. I was aware that his wrath could include any or all of the following: heated debates over nothing at all; wild accusations; quiet yet angry close talking, of which looking at his misshapen dirtlip while smelling his mistreated breath was sure to be a part; and arbitrary punishment, including, but not limited to, cleaning the bathroom (which was littered with cigarette ash and pornography and other remnants of his disgusting lifestyle).

"The fuckin' lighter." He glared at me again.

"What?" I responded, "What lighter?"

"The fucking five-hundred dollar Colibri..." he looked pissed, which would have made me want to laugh had I not known that if I did, I would no sooner be sweeping up cigarette ashes and tweezing back issues of *Family Letters* (pages stuck together) off the floor of the bathroom. "The one with the gold and the ebony," he looked at me, I would say *knowingly*, but he knew nothing. He looked at me like I coveted the thing the same way he did.

"Um..." was all I got in.

"The one I"—he swore again—"showed to all you"—and again—"guys the other day." It had probably been a few weeks, but I remembered; he had shown the lighter to all the employees on his shift, bragging that we were the only store in the district to get one. We all found it equally boring. He paused, as if waiting for me to say something. " It's gone."

I don't remember what I said then. Probably something like "Oh no!" or "Are you serious?"... something to make it sound like I really gave a damn. I didn't, but just then I knew exactly what was going to happen.

"Well, you're all gonna have to come clean. Somebody took it." He spit the words at me like I was going to cower in the corner and confess my sins. I really wasn't in the mood for this.

"Not me," I informed him, turning away so I could at least punch in and get paid to be harassed. I could feel him glaring at my back while I walked to the back room.

In the hours following Duane's departure that day, my coworkers and I discussed the missing lighter. Tim, the assistant manager, promised that if any of us admitted to taking it, they could simply return it to him and he would take it to Duane and protect the identity of whomever the thief might be. Unfortunately, there were no takers. It appeared that everyone was innocent.

Days and weeks passed, but we never forgot about the missing lighter, which Duane, fearing punishment, refused to report to the district manager. It was always, at best, in the back of all our minds; backpack and pocket checks became mainstays of the store's security efforts. On worse days, when Duane decided to grumble indictments against us instead of his regular grousing, it came full on back to the forefront of our collective consciousness while he handed out arbitrary suffering to appease his twisted sense of justice. I began to wonder why no one would just admit to it, or quit. Alas, weeks of bathroom duty didn't have me any closer to admit-

ting to something I didn't do, either. But maybe just a little bit closer to quitting.

Finally, I guess, Duane had had enough of his game. "Wait, Mike," he said to me as I entered the store to once again begin an afternoon shift, "don't go into the back room yet."

I stopped where I was and looked towards the door to the back room. I waited where I was until the door opened and out walked Matt, one of my coworkers and friends. He walked out looking fazed and more than a little bit angry and insulted. He acknowledged me with a nod and then gestured again with his head towards the door he had just exited from. I looked, and there was Officer Dick. His name wasn't really Dick, but that was what we called him, and believe me, it fit.

"You're Michael?" he asked, eyeing me. He was already judging me. That presumptuous prick. I wanted to flick him off, walk out, and just forget about it. After all, it wasn't worth the trouble.

Instead of flicking him off, I just replied "Yeah," and tried to sound innocent and confused, as if I had no idea what any of this could possibly be about. Me oh my, oh heavens, me.

"Come on back here." He motioned for me to follow him into the back room, and so I did. My yearning to lash out in revolution withered, and my nerves took over and lead me to the edge of nausea and back several times as Officer Dick began to shoot questions at me.

"Did you steal the lighter?"

"No."

"Do you know who did?"

"No."

"Are you sure you didn't steal the lighter?"

"Yes."

"You're *sure?*" he persisted. I really appreciated the way he made sure that I hadn't misunderstood the question.

"I'm *sure.*"

"Well then... who do you think stole it?" This question really got to me. So much for honest questioning. Better to just turn us all against each other.

"I don't know," I told him simply.

"Just give me a guess," he was practically begging for me to make an accusation, "and I promise no one will know you told me."

"I don't know." I wasn't budging on this one.

"Fine. I'm sure we'll be speaking together again." The interrogation was over.

Once again, weeks passed. As far as I knew, the investigation went unresolved, but I never spoke to Officer Dick again. Weeks just passed. But, this time, people began to disappear. Tim disappeared, along with others. All those who ever voiced any opposition or posed any clear threat to Duane's sovereignty were gradually pushed towards the fringes until they were gone.

Sooner or later, things got back to normal, if there ever was such a thing at Nashua News. Duane became somewhat less abusive, but no less perverted, and I unfortunately remained in the position of most favored bathroom cleaner until I quit. I soon found a better job and moved on.

Some months later I returned to Nashua News to find it under new management. The new manager informed me of Duane's final fall from grace. After stealing money and products (such as, oh, I don't know... expensive lighters) from the company for over two years, all the while blaming his innocent employees, Duane was ultimately caught in the act of stealing petty cash so he could buy a video game. Of course, he tried to blame it on his assistant manager.

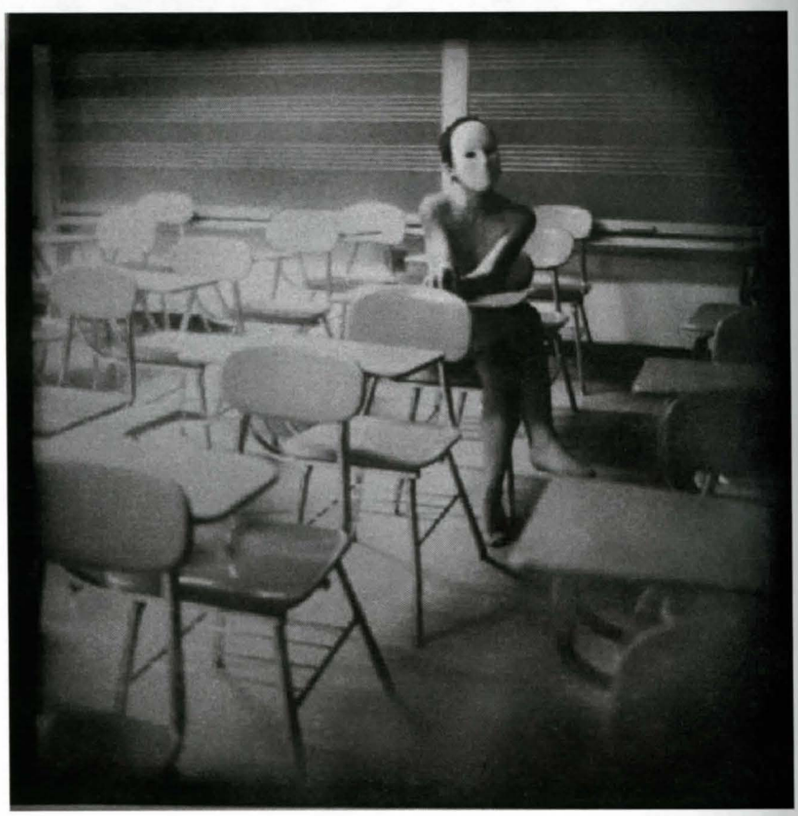
I was surprised by my own reaction to the news. I thought of all the employees Duane abused and muscled out, and who went on to find better jobs. Then I put my hands in my pockets and smiled, and pictured him scrubbing bathroom floors for the rest of his days, with only his precious gold and ebony Colibri to keep him company.

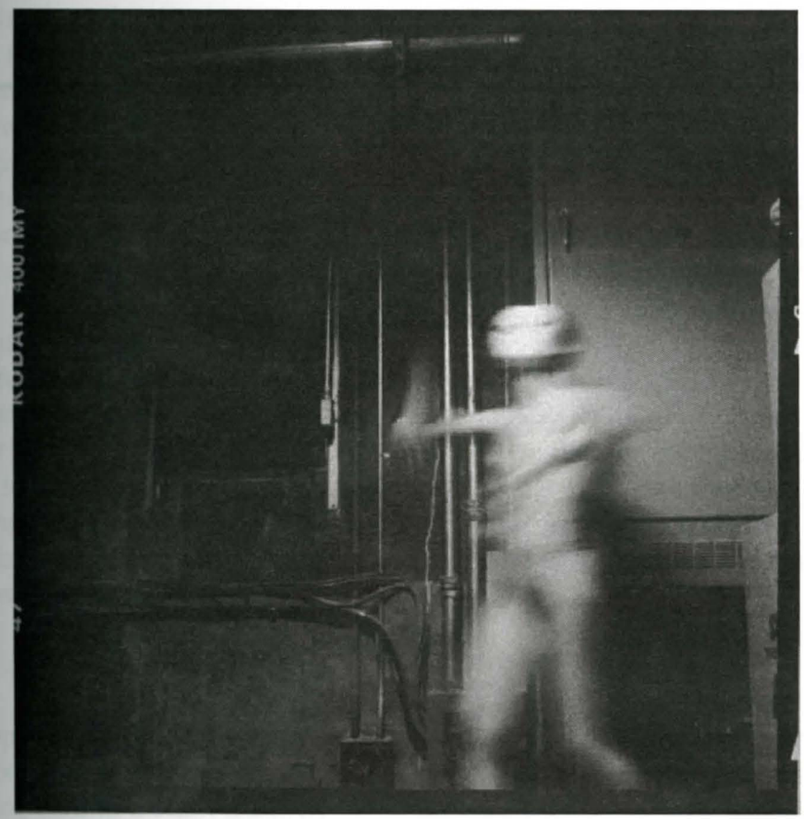
Self-Portraits *(Silver gelatin photographs)*

Melissa Boyajian








KODAK 400TMY

Innocent Girl in Finland (Summer 2001)

Robert Raymond Robins II

From a bleak bus window,
Amidst weeping wind
And Venetian velocity,
A glimpse.

Sweet girl,
I witnessed your purity;
Your curiousness;
Your awesome decree:
"This is what it means to be alive."

* * *

The busy city.
A frying *brain*
On pavement pain.
Failed seekers,
Saturated stomping grounds.
Magnetic sidewalks,
Attracting hard steel eyes.
Shy shoppers embarking upon
Great missions.
An almost romantic ruin of a vast empire.
I felt like *the* traveler from an ancient land.

Your mother,
In a hurry.
The city,
Looking blurry.

The cars,
Tempting boundaries.
The buildings,
Empty foundries.

The smokestacks,
Dead from cancer.
The cripple,
Who was a dancer.
The gray dog,
Panting heavy.
The policemen,
Form a levy.

Tidy uniformed soldiers,
Waging war against decay.
Desperately pointing fingers
(Only to plug up holes)
Only to save the day.
Sealing up the wall,
Holding back an ocean
Of desensitized appall.

* * *

Transposed against the buzzing,
Skipped that magical little girl.
Trailing behind a stern mother,
Piercing her inner world.

Purple day dress danced in breeze.
Fabric moved too intensely,
Like slow motion muscle flexes of
Wild lioness pursuing prey.

One hand stretched outward,
Continuing march.
A half crucifixion,
To save all the souls,
To save what was left.

Clenched in her hand:
Five billion grains of sand.

From where the ocean ends,
Perhaps;
Or from a flower pot of a
Wilting orchid.

Just then . . .

She opened her hand,
With a whimsical whipping *snap*!
An explosion of tiny boulders,
Released unto the world.
A pouring dust cloud.
Eternity:
Tick
Tock
Tick
Tock
This rock
That rock.
The last grain lived out its daring descent.

The little girl just smiled.
She had created something beautiful.

And I, the traveler,
Turned my neck
Like the hour hand of a clock,
Hoping I might see what the magical little girl would do next.
But just as time,
Buses move too fast.

Listening to Highlife in a Cab in Accra

Heather Szafran

Highlife:
n. the bastard child of Bob Marley and Benny Goodman;
synthesized, monotonous, 4-track recordings with syrupy lyrics and terrible sound; the favorite form of local musical expression and entertainment in greater Accra, the capital city of Ghana, West Africa.

These sounds, limited in their variety despite their popularity,
punch holes in the eardrums of anyone who happens to pass
a storefront
a residence
a chop bar or
a taxi
while going through their day.

The music bumps and tweets, laying heavy on four sweaty American girls,
cooking in the liquid air as they sit in a cab,
vainly attempting to get into town, the nightmarish commute
a begrudgingly accepted part of daily life.
Thighs stick to vinyl duct-taped seats, backs and arms to the seatback,
patience wearing threadbare
as horrible canned sounds,
allegedly local color,
gurgle and thump their way, volume on 11,
out of sub-Radio Shack-quality speakers.
The cabbie sings off-kilter and out of tune, adding a
certain special something to the cacophony.

Roadside stands line the approach to the traffic circle
offering watermelons, beds, pineapples, chickens, lamps, tailor services,
bushrat-on-a-stick, Fan Ice, and bread.
Young girls balance used Tupperware on their heads,
the tubs containing little plastic bags filled with ice water.
This is all passed ever-so-slowly—
The stoic Communist-bred automobile with
faulty wiring and no petrol
inches forward in a samba
to the rhythm of the Highlife belching forth from the speakers and
the ceaseless staccato beat of the taxi's horn.
Thumpthumpthumpcracklethump
the music gnashes on, mimicking the frayed nerves and
ever-shortening tempers
of the girls in the car.

Babybabybabybabybaby, I would die for yooouuuuu…

The subject of the fare is breached, in shouts,
over the noxious Highlife.
The driver attempts a swindle, exceeding the prearranged price:
"Too much traffic, no petrol, I must wait until you have gone
until I may pick up more fares…"
All Americans are rich.
One of the girls can marry him and buy him a new taxi.

Another few feet gained, frustration-borne headaches replacing
any last bit of joviality.
Thick choking blackness floats into the car,
tires and trash smolder and stink.
Cops with machine guns
chase stunted, pregnant goats out of the roadway.
Polio victims beg for change as the cars grind past, sitting next to women
who sell oranges in plastic bags at intersections.
Just like L.A.

"My wife, my wife," the driver says to any one of the four girls wistfully,
specifics as to whom he is addressing unimportant—
they can't hear him over the din of the Lada and the

chorus of horns and Highlife.

I want to die in your aaaaarrrrmmmmsssssssss…

Men with sewing machines and women with hard-boiled eggs stacked
sky-high on platters
balanced on their heads walk past them in the shimmering heat,
circumnavigating the snarled collection of motorized vehicles—
they're bound to cross the traffic circle and get downtown
long before the cab will.

Kathmandu

Bott Ikeler

Down the wide stone stairs,
monkeys keeping pace on either side,
I descend from Shiva's phallic palace.
Vendors trail,
stalking, importunate.

Before me an escape route
clears itself:
footbridge, bicycle,
and three-star sanctuary
a street or two beyond.

Halfway across the narrow waters,
my flight's arrested—there's commotion to the left.
Over the railing on the ghats below,
a long, hawk-faced man, wrapped entirely in white,
lies face-up to the afternoon sky.

One man bends over him,
moving methodically from limb to limb
lifting and shaking
hand and foot, hand and foot,
Another, at his head,
trickles water from a cup
into his gaping mouth.

Beside him, even with his shoulders,
a woman on her knees,
rocks and keens,

inconsolable, adamant, unceasing:
her upper body a pendulum of grief.

I lift my eyes for a moment
to a presence beside me on the bridge.
A woman, tourist, turns to meet my gaze;
she tries a tight-lipped smile.
There are tears on both her cheeks.

A noise draws my eye again below:
only an arm's length from the man,
a Nepalese girl, sari of red and black,
sits at the water's edge,
scrubbing a pot with steel wool.

She works away at its scorched bottom,
dipping it from time to time in the river,
turning it by slow degrees
from black to silver.

As long as I watch,
the man dying at her back
never earns a look.

Rhapsody

Jonathan Martin

"If thou beest not immortal, look about you: security gives way to conspiracy. The mighty gods defend thee! Thy lover, Artemidorus."

O Ike, it was silly to begin with. The pledge was empty as it was written – the hollow remnant of an idealism which committed suicide in Hiroshima. A shrug, and so much for the "new deal." Honestly, it was just a reshaping of time-tested barbarism – the sort of unimaginative nonsense which makes one change channels with righteous indignity. Given the state of things, we may as well replace it with "One nation, wholly material." If you're unsure, Ike, consider the facts - behold: when September brought innocence's bare neck to the block, our Abraham appealed not to God, but to an imagined duty to buy our way out of misery, thus delivering ourselves into the strong, healing arms of patriotism. (That pitiful word, like an aged, tired prostitute.) Ah. Wait, you say, we didn't just fight our way to the shops. We are a people of action.

The whir of grindstones, sharpening aged axes, filled the night with a hypnotic humming. Such a peaceful repose they led us into. Moments after, some gave a knowing smile, and congratulated Hobbes on discovering of the true "natural state of man." (Ending centuries of needless denial.) And, yet, Leviathan never sleeps sound. His thirst consumed the last of our stored prayers, leaving this dry season. Now, his hunger...it should rightly consume the whole world. And who cares for the opinions of those both oppressed, and soon to be oppressed? Do the masters of war stop to question the means? And, to what ends can a war of "any means necessary" lead? Does anyone stomach questions anymore these days? Do you, gentle reader? Remember the aged master's command: "You shall listen to all sides and filter them from your self?"

"Uncertain, idealistic – After all, do we have that right?" (Ah, there's the rub.)

Casca is said to have said: "every bondman in his own hand bears the power to cancel his captivity?" Is it yet so? Perhaps once, when the Cave could be defined...this is, assuredly, not Plato's time. Even if we were to stumble into bright freedom, which master should we choose to serve? No, please, for the sake of decency, don't take it *that* way. For, there is always some master, even when Freedom reigns Supreme. Some thoughtful man once warned us, in voluminous writing, that the history of the West was colored by endless attempts to recreate its Roman past. Who it was, well, I couldn't say either. But Rome, ah Rome...it did last for some long time, didn't it? Nothing like the ruins of Rome for lovers, and travelers. What lovely things will be left in our ruins? What lovely things are already waiting there? For, one marketplace author also said: "the cloud capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces, the solemn temples, the great globe itself - yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve." There was more, but you'd not be gladdened to hear it. Though, which do you really prefer: the doomsayers of then, or the impolitic heretics of now?

But let it be. I give you my sprig of lilac.

We Are Not to Blame

Michael Weinbeck

We cried when we heard of the fatal falls
Of kids who screamed "loser" and "freak,"
Whispered wicked harmless gossip about the meek
Kids who that day shot their teenage teasers in the halls.
Blamed it on dark music
And kids who wear black and bondage to local malls.
Surely, we are not to blame.
Four out of five parents say
Sitcoms should have taught them better.
But the world will never be the same.

We gathered in the streets and shouted war
When the towers fell to fate -
Freedom fighters that we taught to hate.
To fight for some kind of freedom on foreign soil.
New dictators, better than the old.
We're interested in more than inexpensive foreign oil.
Surely, we are not to blame.
Four out of five experts say
The CIA should have taught them better.
But the world will never be the same.

We've learned our lesson, we say, drop it.
We didn't encourage it, per se, but did we stop it?

Purity

Shelby Bennett

Always
the purity of white
white wedding dresses
bouquets of white lilies
saint's essences surrounded
in a holy glow of glimmering
dreams of a Christmas with
virgin snow
white fields of cotton
clouds dancing in the sky
red lips smiling displaying pearly teeth
a white light at the end

Purity has been
white-washed over
white KKK hoods
white crystal meth
white toxins billowing from
smoke stacks
white tissues wiping
pale cheeks
a wolf in a white sheep's skin



Photo by Lisa Angelo

To Say My Sickness

Kate Hanson

There was something cloth-like about the air,
The way it rose and fell in gray waves,
I watched the rise of their chests, sitting on their suicide,
In the soft strangle of yellow lamplight.

How hard I struggled not to hear
The desperate cries of such sticky thuds,
How they all dripped the same sadness,
How they all kissed the same color.

And all at once I was struck
By the rug-burn of my touch,
I clenched my fists,
I turned my face to hide the cheapness of my heart,
I drank with them.

Fallen for the horrors of their skin,
When aches opened up,
And booze bled out,
If I couldn't save them from their poison,
I shoved a shard of glass down my throat.

There were scraps of petals fallen unfashionably cruel,
And bodies unfolded like crumpled old shirts,
I watched the smiles smear across the room,
I let the truth dribble shyly on my lips.

I prayed for the heavy quiver of my liver,
Drank to a gag, washed my lungs out with ash,

While they peeled themselves down to mumbles,
Fingered my skin, and taught me how to sin.

I couldn't breathe
Without getting a lick of someone else's breath,
I closed my eyes and let their demons
Claw their way inside me.
I crumbled quietly to a stain of dust.

And there is something about these early hours,
And messy oil prints on glass.
I bite my tongue.
For the chokes of sunrise,
The kicking in my empty tin chest,
Sore in my lungs with no smoke to make it hurt.

Little White Pills

Jaime Weida

The I of the eye is lost in the swirl of the world
Sinking below the milkygrey surface
soft
The edges of objects lose their cohesion
Things flatten
stretching like bubblegum
Ceremony of individuality engulped by
Languid contentment in nothingness
The whorls of the brain unfurl, smooth
and untroubled
floating
Feelings resolve into their simplest colours
All centered around artificial warmth
chemical contentment
lies

In Shadows Growing Wings

Jaime Weida

Act I

"My feet hurt and my skirt keeps riding up." Lydia tugged fretfully at the hem of her shorter-than-mini vinyl skirt with no effect Cheis could see. The bottoms of her lace panties teased him, barely glimpsed above the fishnet-wrapped expanse of her thighs. Below the knee her legs were neatly tucked into shiny black boots with impossible, brittle heels. Cheis looked again at the creamy white curve of her bottom where it joined the soft back of her thigh, her skin slightly dimpled under the stockings.

"I told ya not to wear those shoes, and trust me, it ain't making much difference with that skirt."

"I didn't know the club would be so hard to find, all right? We've been walking for almost an hour now." To hide the annoyance at him and herself that made her voice ragged, Lydia looked again at the paper in her hand. "The website said the club was at 113 Hellas Street, in the Theater District." She ran a frustrated hand through her cropped hair, making it stand on end, then hastily smoothed it back down into a sleek black cap against her skull. "It *has* to be around her somewhere."

"Well, where the hell is it, then?" Cheis glared at a group of trendies in button-downs and khaki who stood snickering at the two of them arguing. Boston's nighttime Theater District rose about them like a gaudy layer cake of neon signs, flashing lights, cars honking, baseball-cap college students out to get drunk and fake-fur matrons with tickets to the latest Andrew Lloyd Webber musical. In her black vinyl skirt and corset Lydia, standing next to Cheis's black leather and chains, felt at best like a prostitute, at worst like a freak. A little girl in a red wool coat with a velvet collar stopped, pulling at her mother's hand and pointing in Lydia's direction. Lydia winced as the flustered mother hurried the child along, turning her own head away with a grimace.

There was a snap and a spark and a sigh as Cheis lit a cigarette, then a sharp voice: "You can't smoke here."

"What the hell do you mean, I can't smoke here? I'm standing out on the sidewalk. I don't even want to come inside your stinking club." Cheis turned to glower at a bouncer standing outside an electric-blue painted expanse of building. Above a polished glass door a neon sign flashed "Club Cerebus" in erratic crimson bursts. Cheis's chest and shoulders were thick with muscle, but the bouncer was fully a head taller than his own moderate 5'8" and had a shaved head and a long scar down the size of his face. The ripped sleeves of the bouncer's grey T-shirt looked as if they might have been split open by the bunched nodules of muscle in his arms. Cheis's eyes glittered blackly from under the brim of his fedora as he stared up at the man, and when Lydia put her hand on his arm she could feel that under the thick leather jacket he was twitching, straining.

"I mean, you don't smoke even *outside* our club. Not even on the sidewalk. You see, the *regular* patrons waiting to go inside don't like it." The bouncer turned to Lydia for a moment, raked her with his flat eyes, and dismissed her. "We're very exclusive here. So get the hell out. *That's* what the hell I mean, boy." His voice dragged across the words, blunt threat of violence, and Lydia stepped quickly in front of Cheis.

"We're just looking for Club Styxx. 113 Hellas Street. *Please*."

"Hellas Street is down further on your right." The man jerked a thumb in the direction without taking his eyes off Cheis. "But I ain't never heard of any kind of club like *that*." Cheis bared his yellowed teeth, incisors filed to points, and Lydia grabbed his hand and fled.

"I wanted to waste him. Why'd ya have to jump in like that, Lyddie?" From the use of her nickname Lydia knew Cheis was not really angry, but still his hand holding the cigarette sketched nervous, jerky motions in the air. She wondered what the price would be later, what Cheis would have to do to get rid of the frenzy she had damped back down inside him. "Lyddie, I just have to let off some steam. I feel like things are closing in on me. I can't even see the sky here. I'm walking through the waste, the physical and spiritual excrement of strangers. You know how I feel about cities, about people. Like a fungus, a cancer taking over the entire earth." He paused, then muttered, "I really don't like this."

"I know you don't." Lydia punched him on the shoulder, gently, then pulled the brim of his hat down over his eyes. These were the only joking, meaningless affections they could show because Cheis had a girlfriend who was not Lydia. And if Lydia's hand slid across his rough-stubbled cheek, lingering, as she dropped it from the brim of his hat it was only an accident and neither of them would ever say differently. Cheis lit her a cigarette without being asked and when Lydia took the first drag she could faintly taste, over the menthol bite of the smoke, the musk of his tongue. Her only sense of him.

"Just remember why we came here," she said quietly.

They had been drunk, of *course* they had been drunk. Cheis had brought a jug of the cheapest red wine he could find to Lydia's apartment a few nights ago. It had been red wine because Cheis was in a vampire phase. He had read *Dracula* twelve times and *The Vampire Lestat* eight, and frequented obscure, sanguinated chat rooms and message boards. He had painstakingly filed his incisor teeth to sharp points because he said there could be some truth to the stories, you never could tell. Cheis brought red wine because he claimed it made him feel like he was actually drinking blood and that it was good practice. Lydia did not want to ask why and for what he was practicing, but they had contests to see who could drink the most glasses in the shortest time and to see how quickly they could finish the entire jug.

Often when Cheis got drunk he liked to use Lydia's computer to search for bizarre topics on the Internet like trepanning and voluntary amputations. Lydia had been in her bedroom listening to Leonard Cohen's "Sisters of Mercy" over and over. She had recently developed a fascination for the song that bordered on obsession, and especially when drunk became sure there was some sort of hidden, mystical meaning in the lyrics. She had been repeating the line "You can read their address by the moon" to herself for several minutes when Cheis called her from the other room, her cluttered study and storage area.

"Lyddie, you better take a look at this."

Lydia had stood behind Cheis and read the website advertisement for Club Styxx, the advertisement that used all the right words, said all the right things. Promised her everything she had ever wanted since she had left her boyfriend and Cheis had given her a smile and a cigarette at a concert and made her his own. Brought her into his world. He had showed her what it meant to live at night, to live outside the boundaries of other people's lives. To live in the darkness where there was no sunlight to destroy all the secret things that hide in the shadows, just waiting to be found. To live where none of the rules mattered because no one would ever see. He had showed her the wild longings that came with a life on the outside, the bitter yearnings he had carried inside for so many years and that she was just beginning to know. Black desire inside her, in the shadows growing wings. Promises.

"I think we should go there."

By the time Lydia and Cheis reached Hellas Street the clubs and playhouses had been replaced by apartment buildings and darkened offices, the glare and tumult of the nightlife left behind them. The street was almost an alley, barely wide enough for a car, and lined chiefly with the backs of apartment buildings.

"There's nothing here, Lydia. I mean, there ain't even street numbers. Let's just give up." Yet even as he grumbled, graveled cigarette voice, Cheis was walking further down the road away from the lights of the main street. Drawn deeper into the shadow of the promise. Lydia cursed as she painfully turned her ankle stepping off the sidewalk, but she followed Cheis into the darkness.

Past the butt-ends of apartments, past a few disued and boarded-up stores. Then the end of the street and a parking lot, chain-link fence locked and tipped with barbed wire, and the vast stone bulk of an unlit building. Lydia turned to stare at Cheis. "What now?"

"That place must be it, Lyddie. There's nowhere else it could be. 'Sides, on one of those doors back there I saw the number 107. Maybe it's one of those warehouse gigs." Cheis tramped over to the fenced-in lot and pulled futilely on the padlock. "There's some kind of tag tied to the lock. Hey, this is really weird. It says the lot is closed Saturday night only. *Today's* date."

Lydia joined him to look at the tag. "Cheis," she said quietly, "That paper is old. It's all yellowed and crumbling. Like it's been here for years."

Cheis was already examining the building, black stone, climbing the three steps up to the tall metal doors. They loomed mutely above him like doors to a vault, painted grey and arched at the top. "There's no way to get in," he called to Lydia, explaining. "No handles. What is this?"

There were no windows at street level, but the top floor of the building was broken by a row of four rectangular windows of textured one-way glass reinforced with chicken wire. They seemed dull and blank as dead eyes, but as Lydia stared upwards she thought she could see a hint of reflection in the furthest one, a whisper of movement. Something fluttering, flickering behind the glass. Cheis was frowning at the door and was just lifting his fist to hammer for entrance when Lydia caught his hand and

put her arms around his shoulders as far as they would go to turn him away.

"Cheis, let's just go. There's nothing here. That website was pretty old, the place has probably closed down. I'll buy you a cup of coffee, I'll buy you a drink, I'll buy you dinner. Whatever you want. Anything you want. Let's just get out of here. Now. *Please.*"

"Jesus, Lyddie, don't freak out on me. We drove all the way down here. I just want to check this place out. What's with you?"

Lydia caught his hand in hers and was tugging on it, pulling him away. "*Please*, Cheis. *Please*. I think I might have written the address wrong, anyway. Please let's leave. *Please*. For *me*."

So Cheis went, griping and making various uncomplimentary remarks, to each and every one of which Lydia responded. If she had not replied, if she had not kept his attention he might have turned back. He might have seen the light in the window, seen what she saw or imagined she saw. That feathery tremble, sharp-edged darting. Was it a thing or a shadow of a thing? It had *not* been for her, not at all. She had turned away, but Lydia knew that if Cheis had seen it, he would have turned back.

Act II

In shadows it was growing wings. An angel that could not abide the light, its skin was pale like the bellies of fish. Silver-razor claws and blind eyes. The sun had never touched it. Its wings were fragile spun of darkness, black velvet feathers. They hurt, thin wire impossible delicate armature. It could never use the wings to fly. So it waited, caught between the reality and the shadow, the promise and the fulfillment. It waited. In the shadows perhaps it cried.



Silver gelatin photograph
by Chris McCarthy

The Dead — not for charles bukowski

Dennis Ludvino

You could reveal this secret—
in the bar as old alcoholics are,
you watch me, a young man,
speak slowly to a young woman.
 What happens c.b. when the living

can no longer create poetry?
You were in a dark corner,
backed against the hollow wall—alone,
blind and drunk with wisdom.
 What happens c.b. when the living

can no longer make love?
When your words are impotent
and sex is senile,
you watch us and smile.
It would make for a great poem
 (you thought),
her and I, but she said something
foreign—those sounds you knew
like lines to an old love poem,
words that traced the dark
silhouette shape of your past.

Your stone skin seemed to melt
and wrinkled fingers wrapped tight
around that bottle—you couldn't
utter a sound, those sour lips
parting only to sip.

If you told me those words
she softly spoke—
I hate you, you bastard, you
who will slowly ruin my life—
I would've asked you,
 what happens charles bukowski when the
 living can no longer write?

Alone

Michelle Richards

I met a woman tonight,
Her name was Laurie, but she wished it was Michelle.
I met her in a bathroom,
Yellow fluorescent lights alive.
She was all made up, hair a bit frizzed.
She had fiery red lips
Shiny rings on both her hands.
She was wearing a button-up shirt
And plain blue jeans with strappy shoes.
Laurie was beautiful, but she didn't know.
She was losing her husband, they were getting a divorce.
Laurie was lost.
She asked me if I was Greek or Italian, words slurring a bit.
I am neither.
Laurie had a son, 21, she said he'd like me,
As she touched my shoulder gently with her long rough fingers.
He had these big strong eyebrows and she said
She loved him.
She loved her husband too.
I thought she might cry as she leaned toward the smudged dingy mirror.
She checked her teeth for lipstick
And brushed a piece of hair forward,
Then pushed it back behind her ear.
She met a guy at the bar,
The guy wore cowboy boots,
Laurie was drunk.
She had a bone to smoke that night
For her long drive home she told me
As she leaned forward opening the pocket at her chest.

She kept asking me if she was alright.
I told her to drink some water.
I saw Laurie in the parking lot later that night
Laced up in the arms of that man who she met at the bar.

The Married Couple

Tom Johnson

Festive balloons--
red,green,purple--
filled the car,
so we had to pop them
just to get in.
Ol' Blue Eyes
sparkled throughout the hall.
Aunt Alice danced with Becky
and even Uncle Lou
stayed sober.
Well . . . somewhat.
Everyone thought
we made a wonderful couple.
The cake was perhaps
too sweet.

Now you sit
across the table from me,
head buried
in a magazine.
Twenty-one years
of wedded bliss.
Bullshit.
Even the sex
has become mundane.
One day
I will rip that mag away
and take you
on the table or the floor.

But there are things
to be done:
the fence needs mending
and the leaves
need to be raked.
I sigh
and take my dish
to scrape it off.

To Raymond Carver

Dennis Ludvino

"...Father, I love you,
yet how can I say thank you, I who can't hold my liquor either
and don't even know the places to fish?"
Raymond Carver, "Photograph of My Father in His Twenty-Second Year"

This never happened.
You are sitting in the lamplight,
but still darkness devours
like a virus eating away half your face.
Those furry brows and slightly
drooping cheeks stare me down.
I don't know what to say partly
because this didn't happen,
but I read your stories
with a bottle of beer anyway.
Halfway I need another
and break to grab one.
When I shut the book
there's little left to do
so I grab another bottle
and fall asleep.
There's not much to say—
this never happened.

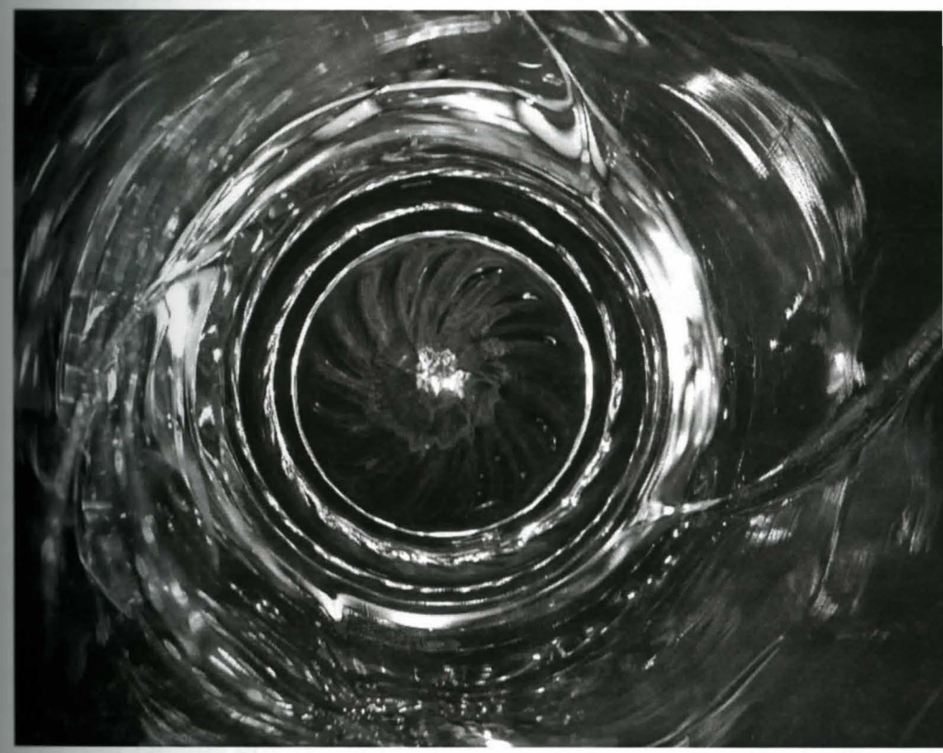


Photo by Adam Fraser

In Those Days, We Never Knocked

Jack McDonough

Howard was my friend from the time I was about seven until we got into high school.

My family lived at the top of the hill, the last house on the street, on the left. I was four years old when we moved in and the road wasn't even paved for a few years after that. In the winter, the city would set up barricades at the bottom of the hill to stop traffic so the neighborhood kids could go sledding.

Howard lived across the street from us with his brother and his parents and his two grandmothers. His brother's name was David but everyone called him Pee Wee because he was younger and smaller than the rest of us.

They were both tough kids in the sense that if you dared them to do something, they'd do it. But they were compassionate, too, if that's a term that could be applied in those days. When we went to the movies, Pee Wee would often walk out as soon as it looked like something bad was going to happen. He'd get scolded at home for that, too, because he was wasting money. A matinee ticket in those days cost eleven cents.

We were always going to each other's houses to play, and one thing I remember is that we never rang the bell or knocked on the door. We always stood outside and hollered.

I'd go over there and stand outside the front door and shout, "Howww-ward." He and Pee Wee would do the same thing when they came to my house. I don't know why we never knocked on the door like normal people. It never occurred to us to do that. I guess we were afraid a parent would answer the door and we'd have to talk to them. Better to holler. I wonder now if that practice was common among kids everywhere or whether it was just something that we did.

One problem we had was that our family dinner schedules (it was called "supper" in those days) were different. We ate promptly at 5 p.m. and Howard's family ate at 6. That cut into play time every afternoon.

The odd thing is that I have no recollection of going to high school with Howard. He says it's because he took the vocational course – sheet metal or auto mechanics or one of those – while I took the regular courses. But I see no trace of him in the yearbook. Anyway, we obviously hung out with different crowds at that stage.

Howard lives a few towns away from the old homestead now. I drive by his house occasionally on my way somewhere. I stopped to see him once. That time I knocked on the door. There was no one home.

Eggs, Mistletoe, and a Side of Family

Amanda Boughman

"Are you awake?"

Throwing the covers off my head I sit up and yell to the offending voice to come in. As my door creaks open, I see my mother silhouetted against the light from the hallway in her flannel pajamas and fuzzy slippers. "Mom, you do realize it is supposed to be me, the child, who wakes you up on Christmas morning, right?"

My brothers and I used to sleep with our ears tuned toward any sound of hoofs or noise from the chimney, but now we must be dragged from underneath our respective covers. My mother, even in innocent-looking pajamas, has resorted to guilting her children into coming down for Christmas morning. "I did not stay up half the night wrapping all of this for you to lay in bed all day, Amanda."

Pulling me from my warm cocoon of sleep, she regales me with stories of past Christmases. "Do you remember the year you got your first Cabbage Patch doll? I spent weeks stalking the aisles of Child World to get that doll for you."

My mother, a small woman, commands respect. This Christmas morning she has dragged, not only me, but also my two brothers downstairs to the Christmas tree. We are now old enough to drive and even vote, but my mother denies that fact. Christmas is the day when my mother sees her children as we were twenty years ago, small and innocent, scrambling to rip open colorful packages to reveal the gifts inside. Since we are all awake against our will my brothers and I pick fights with each other about prime seating in the front room. The best seat is always the "good" couch, which no one is allowed to sit in because it's for "company." On Christmas and other special occasions, such as death, the family members that actually live in the house can sit on the couch in the front room. Whoever has been pushed off the couch either gets one of the recliners in the room or, if they are last in, relegated to the floor.

Sleepy eyes attempt to focus on the small, hastily scribbled-on tags. My father sits among the gifts with the few hairs still left on his head askew and glasses crooked, "This one is either for Mom or Joshua. I can't tell. Jamie, can you read that?" And suddenly a ten-minute shuffling of gifts occurs as each family member tries to remember which gift they bought and which type of wrapping paper they wrapped it in.

"Whose is this?" My mother, always the perfectionist, makes a valiant effort to bring some sense of order to the chaos by holding up a generic package, which could be basically anything that is not a vacuum cleaner. "Why didn't you use the Christmas tags? I bought them for this reason." Those immortal words are spoken this and every Christmas. My mother is obsessive during Christmas and seeing gifts without tags is to her as metal coat hangers are to Joan Crawford. No one in the family, with the exception of my mother, uses the gift tags. That does not stop her though; she faithfully buys new packages of them every year. She even stooped at one point to the level of bribing her children with popular cartoon characters. "Joshua, wouldn't you like Batman flying around on your Christmas gifts this year?"

For my father she bought self-adhesive gift tags to make it easier. "Jim, they can't make it any simpler."

"You either eat scrambled eggs or you can starve!" My father has such a way with words. At just about six feet, with broad shoulders and German features, my father can be a scary person, especially in the kitchen. Christmas morning is my family's time to sit around the table and gorge ourselves on cholesterol-heavy breakfast foods. Once the gift swapping finishes, the feast begins. My father, in slippers, meanders to the kitchen. Due to the horrific wiring in my house cooking in our kitchen is sort of like a puzzle. You can't plug the microwave and the toaster in at the same time or you'll blow the circuit. The television, the toaster oven and the washing machine cannot be on at the same time. On Christmas morning our kitchen looks something like NASA headquarters with industrial orange extension cords running from the dining room and the bathroom to the kitchen so as to save the circuitry. We never make it through the whole of the cooking process without blowing at least one circuit but it's not fun if you don't watch the lights flicker.

I am usually on English muffin duty since I am the only one in the

family who can stand to be in the kitchen with my father while he cooks. My father tends to be a little possessive and territorial when it comes to cooking. Nobody knows why he gets so crazy in the kitchen but since before my parents were married my mother has refused to cook with my father.

I'm set up in the corner with a set of tongs and a plastic bag full of English muffins. My father lectures me before handing over the tongs. "All right, don't turn it on until the waffle iron is done. It'll blow the circuit if we attempt to do both things at the same time." I suppress the urge to roll my eyes as I have heard this speech since before I knew what circuitry was.

I step over the orange extension cord rolled up at my feet as I place the English muffins in the toaster over, waiting for the Waffle iron to finish. Finger poised on the button, waiting for my moment, I feel the pressure. Cooking with my father is not as easy task. From across the kitchen I hear the bellow: "Okay, go!"

While the first round of English muffins crisp in the toaster oven, I begin to ready batch number two. While I am stationed in the corner, my father is a whirling dervish of sorts, moving between the waffle iron, the griddle, the skillet on the stove, and the eggs in the pan. I have learned from experience not to touch any of his foods. I value my life too much for that. My brothers, though, will inevitably come in and stir my father up into a frenzy. Joshua will ask, "Can I have my eggs sunny side up?" At which point my father will wield his spatula like a weapon and point it at my naïve younger brother. "You either eat scrambled eggs or you can starve!" My brother will then grab a piece of bacon from the basket and burn his fingers on it. My father will then order my brother out, "Ha! Got you back for being a jerk. Now get out of my kitchen and clean up the front room."

From my vantage point among the loud mouths of my family at the dining room table, I see the Christmas tree in the front room. I reflect on the tree in between colossal bites of our feast. It sits proudly in front of a picture window so as to show off our family ornaments to unsuspecting visitors. My family does not adopt a theme when it comes to our Christmas tree, which is surprising considering my mother is an uber-perfectionist. Years of ballet classes, baseball, soccer, family vacations, and my father's second job selling Christmas trees during the lean years are immortalized into ornaments that only my family can relate. Every year we get together to decorate the tree, or at least sit in the corner of the room and critique the decorating of the tree. My mother is an artist and she likes continuity on the Christmas tree. As children, my brothers and I would be pacified by my mother's words of wisdom: "Why don't we just put this ornament up here? We wouldn't want the dog to get hold of it," when in actuality, she was just trying to impose her dictatorial views of her perfect Christmas tree onto her children. Now, since we know my mother's idiosyncrasies, we randomly move ornaments around the tree on her. Every time she walks through the front room, where the tree is situated, she will spend ten minutes trying to find out why the tree looks off-balance.

After the food is gone and the dishes washed and put away, my family congregates in the front room. My brothers look through their gifts to amuse themselves. My father, grasping his coffee mug as a lifeline, reads the newspaper. As my mother bends down to collect the used wrapping paper, she sighs to herself. "Next year they'll use gift tags."

Speranza

Carrie Donovan

Maine, Labor Day Weekend, 2001…

I could hear some muffled speech coming from the screened-in porch of our cottage in Maine. Poppy's loud, raspy voice shouted over everyone else's. "What? Pinched, yeah, I've been pinched before. Up at Hampton Beach, I got pinched for punchin' a cop… Well, I didn't know he was a cop. That was a long time ago, though…. Oh yeah, I got pinched for drinkin'…." A loud boom of laughter erupted from everyone at the table.

Denise finally chimed in, "Poppy, she asked if you've ever had a pinched nerve, not if you've ever been pinched."

"Oh, no I don't think so."

The noise died down as everyone filed out the screen door to head home. Relaxing in the bed that rested against the bare-boned wall covered in insulation, I could see between the slats of the Venetian blinds. Uncle Jim and Poppy were the only people left on the porch. Poppy swirled the ice around in his glass and slid a Lucky Strike from his shirt-pocket.

"I think I got what you got, Jimmy," I heard him say as he struck a match and puffed the cigarette. "It hurts to breathe, and I cough all night long." I pulled the itchy, fiberglass-laden blanket up to my chin and listened intently.

"Al, you'd better get to a doctor. They can cure lung cancer, if they find it early enough. Look at me, I may only have one lung and plastic hips, but I don't have cancer anymore."

"I don't go to doctors, I haven't been to a doctor for twenty-five years, Jimmy, and I ain't goin', now."

February, 2002…

The elevator doors swung open to the florescent lights. The smell of sick people and sanitizer bombarded my nose. I rounded the corner with my family and peeked into Poppy's room. He was sitting in a chair in the corner of the dark room squinting at the tiny TV screen. The neck of his hospital gown hung down to the middle of his bony chest. "Hi Poppy," I said as I kissed his sunken gray cheek.

"Ahhh, you're here!" He looked at his watch, which rested in the middle of his forearm. "You're late! I've been waiting for you people for over an hour, where the hull've you been?" He pushed himself to the edge of the seat and banged his slippered feet around on the floor in an effort to stand.

"Al, you don't have to get up," my father said.

"I'm fine. I got sick of lying in bed, so I got up and brought some chairs in here for yous."

"Albie, you shouldn't be doing that. If Dr. Chen saw you…." Grandma glared at him with a slight smile.

"Ma, you kiddin' me?" Uncle Johnny asked, "I'm surprised he's not painting the walls by now."

Poppy patted the wall behind him, "Yeah, they could use a fresh coat." Then, he shuffled across the room and held onto the back of a pink vinyl chair. Dr. Chen, the oncologist, entered to run more tests. He made Poppy sit in the chair and hold his leg out in front of him. "Good, Mr. Speranza. Now look to your right and when I push on your toes, tell me if I'm pushing up or down." Dr. Chen placed his fingers flat on the bottom of Poppy's foot and pushed up. "Okay, up or down?"

"Down," Poppy said. I took a step back to lean against the doorjamb, while the doctor scribbled something on his clipboard.

"Up or down, Al?" Dr. Chen asked as he pushed Poppy's toes down.

"Up," Poppy said with certainty.

I turned my head to look down the hall as if I heard something interesting out there. My father put his hand on my brother's shoulder and pointed at the door. "Let's give him some privacy."

Dr. Chen had already told us that Poppy had about 3-4 months left and that if the tumor on his spine got any bigger, he could be paralyzed for the rest of that time.

July 2002…

I knocked on Poppy and Grandma's apartment door. "Yeah, I'm comin', hold your hosses….Who's there?"

"It's me."

The door swung open, and Poppy appeared in his flannel shirt and brown, paint-stained workpants. He leaned his walker against the wall and kissed me hello. A smell almost like black licorice lingered in the air as he turned away. "Look at what I got," Poppy pulled his walker out and pushed on a white plastic dome attached to the front of it. "It's my headlight! I couldn't see my way to the bathroom at night so your father glued a Tap-light on here!"

He started back down the hall picking up the walker and slamming it down with each step. *Beep. Beep.* "Uncle Jimmy gave me a hawn, too. I can beep at all the pretty girls, now." He re-enacted a situation with an imaginary girl, "Excuse me, miss. I dropped that, can you pick it up for me?" *Beep. Beep.* "Thank you, dear."

He sat down at the kitchen table to finish his "Italian coffee," as he calls it. It's a mixture of Sambuca and black coffee in a high-ball glass. "Ahhhh, good for the heart," he said as he took a big gulp and pounded his chest.

Maine, Labor Day Weekend, 2002…

"Albie, you're not supposed to be doing any heavy lifting!" Grandma said.

"Eh, Mama go back out on the boat with all those spring chickens and get a nice tan," Poppy barked. "I'm just gonna finish painting the walls, then I'll relax."

"That's great, Albie, but when you're hurting tonight, don't come crying to me!"

My father was next to check on Poppy about an hour later. We heard them from the beach. "Al, what are you doing? Why would you paint the insulation?"

"I'm lightening it up over here. See, I paint the insulation white, it brightens the room."

"Al, why don't you come down to the beach for a drink? What do you want, a beer or whiskey?

"What time is it? Ahh, it's after eleven, I'll have the Crown Royal." Poppy shuffled down the rocky hill to the beach steadying his glass of whisky in one hand while he steadied himself on the cane in his other hand. White wisps of hair poked out from under his pale-blue fisherman's hat. It was hard to believe that just the summer before, a thick wave of brown hair sat atop his dark, Sicilian forehead.

September, 2002…

I answer the phone. "Hello?"

"Hi, Carolina. Are the mamas and the papas home, yet? Dey came down to see me but I was sleeping. I told your grandmother to wake me up if anyone comes here for me, but she don't listen."

"They're not home, yet, Poppy. How ya doin'?"

"Good, my tumor shrunk again! I have to start chemo again on Monday. Yeah… So I'll be around for anudda week, at least…. I have to take the train in to Boston. Last time dey let me take it for the senior citizen discount, twenty cents. *He, he.* The lady fought wit' me over it. She wants a dollar, I told her no. I never paid more than twenty cents for a train ride in my life, I told her. She finally let me go."

Albie, who are you talking to, now? Grandma shouted in the background, partly because she was annoyed, but also because Poppy can barely hear.

"It's Carrie, you wanna talk to her?" Okay, Carrie, Grandma wants to talk to you, now, so I'll see you later.

"Your grandfather's driving me crazy, today. He went to the bar with the guys and came back a raving lunatic, so I thought I'd save you by getting on the phone."

"Don't worry about it, Grandma. I never get to see him, so he cracks me up."

"Yeah, well listen to what he did to Uncle Johnny yesterday…. They went food shopping together, and Poppy got tired, so he went to sit on the bench. Next thing you know, Johnny's picking up a head of lettuce and hears a woman yell, 'You need a license to drive that thing!' Johnny looked up and your grandfather was flying at him in one of those motorized carts.

"He didn't know how to stop so he hit the table. Then, he tries to drive away and the battery dies. Johnny almost died of embarrassment. He said he'll never go back there again."

"I have to go, Carrie, someone's at the door. I shall see you."

Thanksgiving 2002…

Poppy stroked his head of brown bristles while he examined the freshly painted dining room walls. "You painted this all by yourself, Carrie?"

"Yup."

"So how come you hired me to do your bedroom last year, if you know how to paint?" he joked.

"I didn't know I knew how. This is the first time I actually did it alone."

"Well you did a great job," he commented. Then he spotted my grandmother's cheesecake on the table. "What da hull is this?" He smirked as he began to harass his next victim. "Hilda," he yelled out to the kitchen, "What is dis? You're cheesecakes don't come out like dis."

He jumped out of his chair and poked a finger in the side of the cheesecake, which had flattened due to the ride in the trunk from Everett to Billerica. "HILDA!" he yelled.

Grandma knew better than to answer him, so he waltzed out to the kitchen wearing a giant grin. "Did you see that cheesecake?" I heard him start on her.

"Albie, you better go back in there, I can't put up with you right now."

"No. Did you see that? What the hell happened there? That's no cheesecake, that's a pancake!" He grabbed Grandma's elbow to drag her into the dining room. "Come here. Come look at dis, Hilda."

As Poppy poked and prodded at the cake, and Grandma shook her head in an effort to act as if she was actually angry, I recalled a scene in this dining room, years before.

It was a holiday, either Christmas, Thanksgiving, or Easter because those are the only days we use the dining room. I was helping Grandma set the table, to the best of my childhood ability, when I asked, "What's your last name?"

"Speranza."

"What does Speranza mean?"

"It's Italian for hope," she replied.

Harvard, Massachusetts, 1996

Elisa Adams

For Richard

White metal grave marker, do you remember?
Shaker house, long-silent house,
Do you still hear echoes of the children's voices?
Do you remember my footsteps
On your clean-swept floors?

The willow tree blesses us
as we dance beneath its branches, you and I.
Have we finally broken the curse, found each other,
found a path to togetherness
that will last longer than a moment?
We laugh, lighthearted. We have forever,
and that is enough.

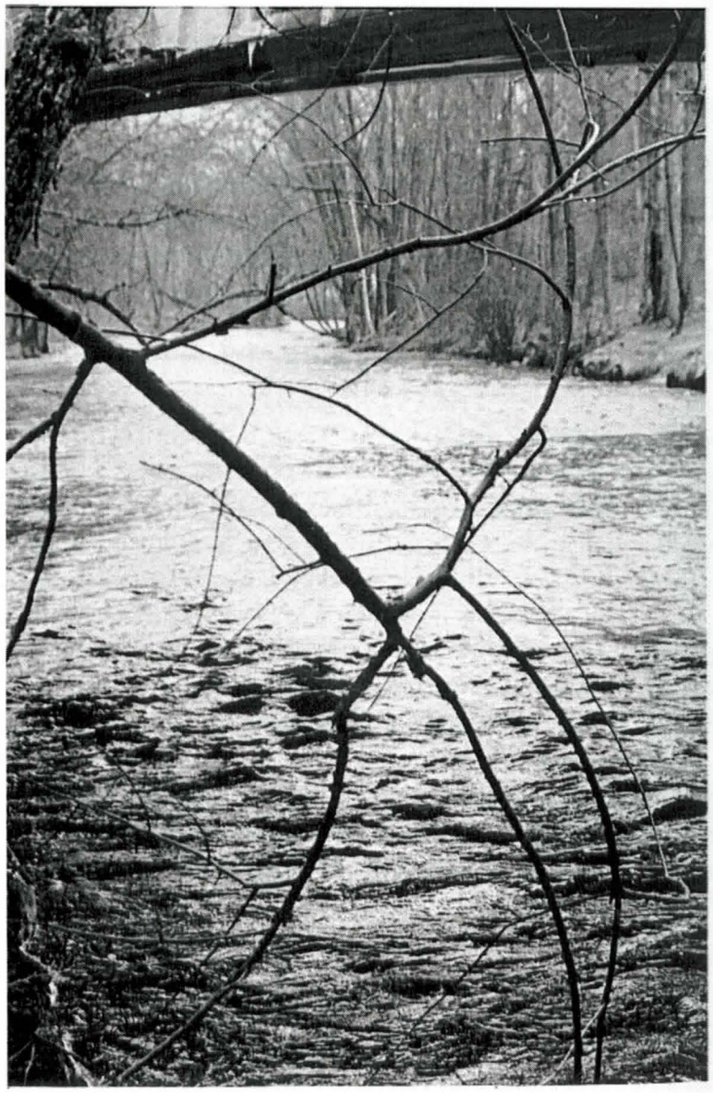


Photo by Tracey Hanson

Time's Mercy

Shawn Landry

Gliding along a false river,
flurries of colored snow, not yet winter.
Brilliant splashes of vibrant release
appear at every bend and crease.
A silver disc floats in the sky,
grants me time.
I ponder upon squandered days,
relive memories of summertime made.
How fast the change.
No more the same
as tomorrow's water today.
Fleeting chances,
cherish the dances,
collect experiences, make them mine.
No wasted seconds,
mercy of time.

Morning

Susan Roy

On the far away bank
Of a mythical pond
There is a Goddess
Who sits all night long.

The sound of her fingers
Caressing the water
Is the sound that is made
By the oars here and now.

Legs know the pressure;
Arms know the rhythm.

The sky is starting
To lighten a little;
The outline of clouds
Are blue, purple and pink.

A tiny splash here and there
From a fish jumping high
Like the morning mist rising
To kiss the sky.

Stomach is tight;
Shoulders relaxed.

The shaft of the oar
Where it's locked into place
Is much like the hand
On a Grandfather clock.

Though it moves just an inch
The noise is intense;
It counts out the beats
Of the oars' solemn march.

Eyes straight ahead;
Chin up; sit tall.

Millions of butterflies
Appear to be dancing
Across the branches
Of trees going bald.

Some float to the water
And land gracefully;
Others flap their wings
And go nowhere.

Relax the grip;
Don't speed up.

This moment in time
Is not spent alone.
The people on board
Are not related by blood,

But that matters not
To the shell underneath
As it carries them all
Down the river as one.

A Walk Through Seasons

Adam Fraser

Sometimes I feel as if I am frozen in time,
falling leaves surround me and gather at my feet.
I blink and I'm buried as autumn unwinds.
Who would have thought this walk would last so long?

I've but lifted one foot since summer's last day,
and all but that foot has fallen and since blown away.
I inhale and am filled with winter's cold breath.
Day's later, I exhale the warm cloud from my chest.

Snow climbs past my knees as frost gathers and melts
on my face as I walk along this ever-changing path.
But now buds, birds, and leaves, and pollen in the air.
In a blink, spring is summer and so continues time's wrath.

Early Snow

Gigi Thibodeau

Before the leaves have finished their business with branches,
before we've slid storm windows down their greasy tracks,
before wool coats have shed their plastic,
and the mums have shrunk to ragged sticks, it comes—
so light at first it could be imagination
flicking its tongue—your almost-kiss.

Last night I dreamed of knitting—
needles clicking all fall—
then, come Christmas,
of wrapping you safely
in a muffler of sage green wool.
Alone now at dawn,
running shoes slipping on bricks,
nothing seems so certain.
My heart races with a squirrel up her tree;
she knows what I'm thinking:
the snow comes, it comes—no careful plans
can make us ready.

I turn the corner onto our street,
knowing you are still in bed,
wrapped in blankets like winding sheets.
It's falling harder now—
can you see it in your dream?
How it clings to the grass,
hides the green—
intimate oblivion complete
as my skin beneath your lips.

I Went There

Mike Youngstrom

I went there.
In my mind grew a second life
in those beautiful rocky mountains
I didn't talk, I didn't speak
I didn't read, I didn't know

I left my books at home and studied just
the singularity of perfection—
a wisp of silent wind is ravenous thunder.

There is peace where you expect to find it.
Stop looking.

Lowell, Dusk

Hilary Holladay

Driving down Pawtucket Street
at not quite four in the afternoon
you come to a bend in the road
where the sun drains
into the ice-strewn Merrimack
and your left hand throbs with joy
for all you can and will do in this world
while the right one grasps
the holiness of all things
you don't know how to say.

If you talk about this with anyone
it will only be to report
how beautiful it always is
at this hour, in that place
where you keep finding yourself
on your way home
or wherever it is you mean to go.

The Offering is an annual publication of the University of Massachusetts Lowell Literary Society. Submissions are accepted from all university students, staff, faculty and alumni. The initial review of submissions is open to all members of the university community during a one-day read-in early in the spring semester. Please contact the society's faculty advisors if you are interested in participating in next year's review.

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The Offering 2003

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UMass Lowell Literary Society

Cover photo: *Goats, Pepperell, MA* by Tracey Hanson